

Impact of Journalism Training on Editorials and News Values in Cameroon

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Abstract

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For over four decades after the independence of Cameroon in 1960, jetsams and flotsams imposed themselves in the media landscape through on-the-job training. The implication is that more often than not they ignore the tenets of journalism practice which is acquired through journalism training. This has led to below average performance in terms of media output.

In advancing reasons for this state of affairs, Cameroon media watchers have cited political and economic instability as foremost causes. However, a very close and critical examination of this dominant thinking requires alternative explanations. One of these explanations is the quality of Cameroon media managers: publishers, editors and reporters. This is based on the observation that most of the media managers of the first two decades of Cameroon's independence acquired skills through on-the-job-training.

As a consequence, the quantity and quality of media output is below expectation. This shortcoming in our understanding needs to be examined in an attempt to identify reasons for the low performance. We expect media growth to be proportionate to the nation's growth. This is not the case. Given that there has been a modest effort by government and non-governmental organizations to promote journalism training in Cameroon since the 1970s, this paper therefore attempts to examine whether or not this training is impacting on journalism practice in Cameroon.

Two research questions: (1) Has the quantity and quality of editorials improved since the advent of journalism training in Cameroon in the 1990s? (2) Has adherence to news values improved with the inception of structured journalism training in Cameroon? The study is based on the quantity and quality of editorials and adherence to news values as a function of the skills that have been acquired from professional journalism training schools in Cameroon universities and higher institutions of learning.

Two methodologies are used: A content analysis of two contemporary Anglophone newspapers: *The Post* and *Eden Newspapers*. Two units of analysis – editorials and news stories were examined. A survey of media managers: publishers, editors and reporters was also carried out to assess the quality of journalism practice across four categories of journalism practitioners: degree holders in journalism, degree holders in other fields, diploma holders in journalism and on-the-job trained journalists.

The findings reveal no editorials in both The Post and Eden newspapers for the period studied. This was against expectation. In terms of quality of news stories based on journalistic values, the data indicate that news stories are highly affected by wrong grammar - 67% for The Post and 66.4% for Eden. Spelling errors indicate 19% and 33.3% for The Post and Eden respectively. As for errors on facts, the data reveal 14% for The Post and 0.3% for Eden. When adherence to news values was examined, The Post Newspaper indicated 79.4% adherence as against 67 % for Eden.

From the study, evidence is mixed whether journalism training so far has led to improved journalism practice in Cameroon.

Key words: Journalism training, journalism practice, news values, Cameroon.

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Introduction

For over four decades, Cameroon has been experiencing below average performance in media output in terms of editorials, news writing, design and ethical considerations. Cameroon media watchers have advanced many reasons to account for this state of affairs, foremost being political and economic instability.

However, a very close and critical examination of this dominant thinking requires alternative explanations. One of these explanations is the quality of Cameroon media managers: publishers, editors and reporters. This is based on the observation that most of the media managers of the first two decades of Cameroon's independence acquired skills through on-the-job training.

As a consequence, this has implications for the quantity and quality of media output which is below expectation. This shortcoming in our understanding needs to be examined in an attempt to identify reasons for the low performance. We expect media growth to be proportionate to the nation's growth. This is not the case.

However, since the early 1970s, there has been a modest effort by both governmental and non governmental agencies to promote journalism training in Cameroon. It is in this light that this paper attempts to examine whether or not this training is impacting on journalism practice in Cameroon. With current graduation rate of over one hundred media professionals annually, the fundamental issue is how much does this impact on the quality of journalism practice in Cameroon's media landscape?

Methodology

Two methodologies have been used: (1) content analysis, and (2) a survey. A one year content analysis (2008-2009) of two major Anglophone newspapers: *The Post Newspaper* and *Eden* constituted the framework of the study. Two units of analysis – editorials and news stories in terms of news values, headlines, leads and body formed the basis of analysis. Facts, grammar and spelling constituted dimensions of quality.

Ninety four newspapers of The Post and Eden newspapers were randomly selected across a one year period from August 2008 to July 2009. We blocked six months of 2008 and randomly selected three months (August, October and December), and blocked six months of 2009 and randomly selected three months (March, June and July).

Since they publish bi-weekly, we expected to have a total of forty eight newspapers for each organ across this time period. While we got forty eight newspapers from The Post, we however got

twenty five newspapers from Eden. The inability to get forty eight newspapers from Eden can be explained by inappropriate storage of back copies.

The second method is a survey of media managers: publishers, editors and reporters. Four categories of journalism practitioners: degree holders in journalism, degree holders in other fields, diploma holders in journalism and on-the-job trained journalists were surveyed for self-assessment of the quality of journalism practice. Combining content analysis and survey provides a better appraisal of journalism quality from the perspectives of content and journalist's self assessment.

Succinctly, two major research questions: (1) has the quantity of editorials and news stories increased since the advent of journalism training in Cameroon? (2) Has the quality of news stories (facts, grammar and spelling) improved with the inception of structured journalism training in Cameroon? This is in conjunction with Khan (2008) who noted that journalism education should be more than teaching students how to write. It should teach them to think, to verify, to acclaim, to criticise and, only then, to synthesise. Furthermore, Ezenta Eze (Murphy et al, 1987) noted that graduates of universities invariably perform better. Journalism graduates are therefore expected to perform better.

Journalism Education in Cameroon

From the inception of independence, 1960 up till 1970, there was no formal or informal structure for journalism training in Cameroon. The few professionals at the time acquired training outside the country from journalism training institutions in USA, Canada, France, Algeria and Nigeria, while the rest acquired skills on-the-job. In 1970, Cameroon in conjunction with four other Central African sub-regional countries (Gabon, Congo Republic, Chad and Central African Republic), created an International School of Journalism (ESIJY) in the University of Yaounde, Cameroon. This school had the objective of training university level journalists to man governmental media structures in the French tradition of Grandes Ecoles in which graduation from the institution was automatic to obtaining a civil service job (Tanjong and Muluh, 2007). Today, the school is called the Advanced School of Mass Communication (ASMAC), with Cameroon as the sole owner. Following the university reforms of 1993, ASMAC stopped training journalists solely for the civil service and adopted a more conventional journalism training programme.

In 1993, with the creation of the University of Buea, (to cater for the interest of Anglophone Cameroon) the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication (JMC) was amongst its first programmes. The department of JMC offers a three year degree programme (B.Sc in Journalism and Mass Communication). The major objective of this programme is to foster journalism training in Cameroon, with the mission to provide coherence between theoretical conceptualisation and practical experience in the training of mass communication professionals.

Progressively, middle level journalism programmes in non governmental institutions, (Institut Siantou, Yaounde and Polytechnic, Bambui, L’Institut Ndi Samba Superiure) were created. The spirit of this period was characterized by media democratization; a logical follow-up of the democratization process in Cameroon. These institutions offer diploma courses in journalism leading to entry/ middle-level professionals.

The current trend indicates that there are two major governmental institutions that offer degree level training and three non governmental institutions that offer entry/middle level training. Graduation rate stands at over one hundred trained journalists every year across the five institutions.

Insert Table 1 About Here:

Journalism Environment in Cameroon

Since the democratization process in the 1990s, Cameroon is experiencing a changing media landscape. Following the liberalization of the press, newspaper proliferation has increased tremendously. Cameroon has well over one hundred newspapers across dailies, bi-weekly, weekly and monthly. Majority of these are Francophone newspapers and only a handful are Anglophone. Radio ownership has evolved from the government monopoly of eleven radio stations to well over a hundred radio stations, mostly privately owned. As for television (TV), government monopoly of TV is over. There are today over ten recognized privately owned TV stations compared to one government owned TV (CRTV). However, it should be noted that the lifespan of these media outfits is very short. Many reasons account for this - the chaotic deregulation policy as well as market forces. Furthermore, politicians have gone into media ownership business as a means to acquire political power. Thus, statistics of newspapers, radio and TV does not reflect the actual situation.

The enlargement of the media landscape has engineered the desire for journalism practice. The creation of many private owned newspapers, radio and television required manpower which could not be satisfied by the few journalism training institutions that existed. This has transformed the media environment into more or less of a dumping ground. Journalists within the field come from all sectors including school drop outs, university graduates from different areas of studies (humanities, science and social science) and just about anybody who feel they can make a few sentences or speak coherently. The use of “pidgin English” over both government and private owned audio-visual media has encouraged desperate young Cameroonians who are unqualified, to create niches for themselves. The landscape is now inundated with bad grammar, poor sentence construction, uncoordinated headlines and unrelated leads. It is normal to come across hard news stories that are written in the form of minutes which denotes a lack of news writing skills. The use of language by these infiltrators is often verbose as they try to impress the readers by using ‘difficult to understand’ words, rather than pass on the message.

As a consequence, this has resulted in unethical practices, the most famous being ‘gombo’ (receiving money from politicians and other interested individuals as remuneration for media coverage). Advocates of ‘gombo’ argue that job insecurity and poor salaries necessitate the practice for survival. These parvenus live off ‘gombo’ offered by political personalities or other individuals interested in media coverage. Drawing from anecdotal evidence, some of these infiltrators go to the extent of blackmailing personalities with destructive reports if they do not provide ‘gombo’. The most recent case is that of the closure of Sky One Radio by the Minister of Communication, Issa Tchiroma Bakary, in August 2009. The Minister justified the closure under the argument that Sky One Radio is more of a blackmailing medium than a news organ.

Sky One Radio was running a programme called “Le Tribunal” which tried individuals and institutions on the air. Judgments were passed based on evidence provided by the public for or against the individual or institution. This programme according to The Post Newspaper (August 2009) became a departure point for some of the journalists of this radio to dig dirt on some personalities and threaten them with judgment on “Le Tribunal”. According to the Minister of Communication, Sky One Radio failed to respond to calls to refrain from blackmail and defamation on this programme, which led to its closure. The Minister’s decision was applauded by most journalists. Sky One Radio was largely blamed for creating a strange genre of journalism.

In effect, some of these detractors are supported by some unscrupulous political personalities who pay them to write damaging stories about their opponents. This has led to reporting that is more focused on personalities than on actual news events. As Coronel () noted, the media in such environments are often used as proxies by political groups to fight each other. This sows divisiveness rather than consensus, promoting hate, suspicion and social mistrust. Given this situation on the ground, the question by Occitti (1999) on how the proliferating private media contribute to democratic debate becomes a crucial issue.

Other factors advanced for the poor performance of trained journalists include the fact that editors are in constant conflict with publishers to determine what is news. Publishers are more interested in selling their papers, so they go for items that bring them political and economic benefits. On the other hand, editors who are more professional prefer news stories that are based on news values. However, publishers argue that they need to sell their papers so they pander to the whims and caprices of the public and sometimes the rulers. This has a direct impact on news writing style as the skills that are taught in the classroom clash with writing styles in the field. At the end of the day, as the adage says, “he who pays the piper dictates the tune”, the publishers in turn pay the editors and so determine what news is. In line with this trend, Picard (2004) notes that responses of some media managers who are primarily focused on economics affect journalistic quality and produces practices that diminish the social value of newspaper content. As a result, journalism

personnel find themselves more concerned about the business aspects of the press than the social value of the content.

Another observation is that trained journalists, increasingly branch out into other sectors that are more lucrative, leaving journalism practice to adventurers. On the side of publishers and media owners, they argue that their investment capital cannot pay and sustain trained journalists who require higher salaries. This is evidenced from the distribution of journalists across qualifications from some surveyed newspaper organs. Out of twenty employed journalists, not counting stringers, in *The Post*, only five have a degree in journalism, seven have a degree outside journalism, four have a diploma in journalism and four are on-the-job trained. Across the respondents interviewed, 23.5% have a degree in journalism, 35.3% have degrees in other fields, 23.5% have a diploma in journalism and 17.5% are on-the-job trained. In line with in house employment rates, the data clearly shows that journalism graduates are in the bottom of print media employees.

Added to these disappointing circumstances is the fact that there is a vacuum in the field of journalism practice. Seasoned Journalists fled the country in their numbers during the democratization process of the 1990s for fear of political reprisals (imprisonment, battery, assassination and destruction of property). Those who survived the system have long gone on retirement. This widened the vacuum and poses a problem for present day journalists who don't have mentors. The absence of seasoned journalists in Cameroon's media landscape is particularly damaging because young journalists have not inherited journalism values and adept reporting skills.

There is also a proliferation of journalism associations, Cameroon Union of Journalists (CUJ), Cameroon Association of Anglophone Journalists (CAMASEJ) and many others. Due to the confusion of journalism practice in the field, there are too many dichotomies: public versus private journalists, Anglophone versus Francophone journalists, Anglo-Bamilike versus Beti (ethnic) journalists. In the midst of this confusion, some journalists find themselves in more than one category. This has led to a division in the field of journalists, rendering it difficult for them to negotiate with government and private media owners. Both government and journalism associations find themselves at loggerheads in the fight to define who is a professional journalist and what is expected of them.

Journalistic Performance in Cameroon

In the context of media practice, Journalists are regarded as powerful in Cameroon. This is evident in the amount of money that some journalists acquire in the form of 'gombo' when they go out on coverage. Journalists also receive special treatment as a group in meetings, seminars or other activities whose organizers seek wide coverage. This has somehow blurred the lines between journalism and mere story telling. "Story telling" is used here to describe how some journalists report news events. News stories go more in the line of what the Minister or some other

government figure did in one locality or the other. There is a lack of critical analysis of events and no evidence of investigation. Reports therefore remain at the level of common knowledge and the background to the story or the lesson behind it is never known.

Journalistic performance has been described by Dayan and Katz in Berkowitz (1993) as a situational variant process that is neither static nor fixed. This implies that news within the context of journalistic performance is an unfolding and procedural variable. It requires a background and a possible or eventual conclusion.

In effect, this study looks at journalistic performance as the product of journalism training. This refers specifically to editorials and news writing skills that reflect a belonging to a given field through the use language, writing style and news angle. Editorials succinctly open up debate through the stand points of the paper. Editorials reflect the view of the publishers and the editors on pertinent issues that are of prime importance to the audience and the state. It has been noted that editorials reflect fundamental differences between the kind of news agency and the audience it targets. In a content analysis of six British newspapers, Namewirth, (1969), discovered quantitative and qualitative differences in newspaper editorials. The study revealed that editorials in certain papers, termed “prestige” reflected and catered to the needs of the elite while “mass newspapers” were characterized by partisanship.

News products are therefore landmarks of journalism. They reflect skill, creativity and performance. As a consequence, it is expected that societies that offer journalism training have a reflection of such training in editorials and news writing, where public discourse is enhanced and shaped. This is not the case in Cameroon as evidenced in the absence of editorials in the two newspapers that were content analyzed.

Findings

A content analysis of both The Post and Eden indicate no editorials in the time period analysed. The publishers and editors of both newspapers say the reason for this absence is often due to time constraints, or the lack of burning issues to write on. Editorials are not written by just any reporter but by seasoned journalists who have the capacity to analyze the issues based on background information gathered through years of practice. This therefore poses a problem as very few practicing journalists have the skills to write editorials. In spite of the above explanations, the absence of editorials in the newspapers is worrisome. This is confirmative of our assertion of below average journalism practice in Cameroon. Another underlying factor is that publishers and editors spend more time on private businesses that assure benefits rather focus on standard news reporting.

Using journalism values for news (proximity, prominence, human interest, oddity, conflict), we found from the content analysis that 20.5% of news stories did not satisfy the classic definition of news. The Eden respectively showed a high percent 37.4% of non standard news stories. Qualitatively, the paper lacks the necessary ingredient to capture and hold the attention of the target audience. One would expect the increase in journalism training to reduce error in journalistic judgment of news values. However, the data does not suggest this. 20.5% and 37.4% for The Post and Eden respectively are in our estimation not satisfactory. Our judgment is based on the fact that graduates in journalism are equipped with the necessary news values for news reporting. When this is not evident in practice, the conclusion is that either journalism graduates have not acquired knowledge and skills, or they have been contaminated by the corrupt newsroom environment. This is an issue of major concern to journalism practice in Cameroon.

When the quality of news stories was examined across facts, grammar and spelling, the two newspapers exhibited gross incompetence in the use of language. The post recorded 67% of grammatical errors while Eden recorded 66.4%. This denotes the absence of strict newsroom editing and a lack of attention to detail. In one part, this laxity might reflect the absence of a critical civil society. The qualitative criticism of journalist's use of language is not based on the standards of English majors but rather on the fact that English is a first language for Anglophone Cameroon.

In the same vein, spelling errors were remarkably visible in both The Post (19%) and Eden (33.3%) newspapers. Wrong spellings of common words denote negligence on the part of the reporters and editors. However, wrong spellings of names become a factual error when a personality, event or place cannot be identified because of the absence of one or two letters from their names.

As a follow up therefore, analysis of both The Post and Eden also revealed the existence of wrong facts with 14% and 0.3% respectively. Errors in facts indicate negligence in upholding the cardinal principle of objectivity in journalism practice. No wonder then that there is a total outcry in the Cameroon public on journalists injecting their opinion more than facts in to news stories.

Insert Table 2 About Here

The phenomenon needed alternative explanations. We therefore examined the data for possible explanations using the employee category of both organizations. It is evident from the data that only 20.5% of employees are degree holders in journalism. Degree holders in other fields make up 31%, Diploma holders in journalism, 33% and on-the -job trained, 15.4%. This correlates with the assertion that because of low salaries and insecurity of tenure, most journalism graduates prefer to work outside the mainstream media.

An overall view of the data suggests that trained journalism practitioners make up only half of the work force in print organs (degree holder in journalism, 20% and diploma in journalism, 31%). This has limited impact on editorials and news writing in quantity and quality.

A further attempt to assess the impact of journalism training on editorials and news stories based on journalist's self assessment of their colleagues revealed that on-the- job trained journalists were rated consistently low across grammar, facts and spellings. Meanwhile, degree holders in journalism had the best scores across grammar, facts and spelling.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Evidence from the data indicates that the presence of trained journalists could have positive impact on journalistic output. As Singer (2003) puts it, the key role of the professional can be fulfilled only by people with particular training, skills and judgment. However, very few journalism graduates are found within print organs which explain the limited impact of journalism training on editorials and news writing.

Some Conclusions

One would expect that journalism training would lead to improved quantity and quality of editorials. This is not the case. On the same note, one would expect journalism training to improve the quality of news writing (facts, grammar and spellings). The evidence is mixed. It is not a given that the creation of journalism institutions both university and middle level has led to improved quality of journalism practice. The point is that political, economic and cultural factors interact with journalism training to impact on quantity and quality of editorials and news writing. Politically, journalists are periodically harassed and abused by the military under instructions from territorial administrators; accurate information is scarce due to information hoarding by government ministries. When journalists don't have information, they report haphazard and incorrect stories.

A direct result of this will be the possible improvement of the working environment and job security in order to attract journalism graduates in to the mainstream print media. There is a need for prioritization of investment on journalism training (human and material), from both government and non governmental agencies, if Cameroon has to build a strong media capacity to participate in Africa's developing communication sector.

Furthermore, journalism practice has moved in to the superhighway of communication. Cameroon needs to adapt to the trend and make contributions to the structural growth of journalism in Africa. There is also the need to define qualities that uphold and assure standards of journalism practice in

Cameroon given the history, political, economic and cultural context of Cameroon. This in essence can only be achieved if scholars rethink the meaning and contribution of journalism to Africa as a whole and Cameroon in particular.

Table 1: Journalism Training Institutions in Cameroon

Name	Year	Training Level	Purpose
ESIJY (ESSTIC/ASMAC)	1970	Undergraduate and Graduate	Training journalists for government media
Institut Siantou Superiur	1991	Diploma/MA	Train journalists to fight the economic recession
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Buea	1993	Undergraduate and Graduate	Produce well trained entry level professionals and budding scholars
Institut Ndi Samba Superieur	1993	Diploma	National Development
National Polytechnic Bamenda	1996	Diploma/Higher National Diploma	National Development

Source: Ministry of Higher Education

Table 2: Quality of News Stories Controlling for Facts, Grammar and Spelling Errors

	The Post		Eden	
Error Type				
Facts	75	(14%)	30	(0.3%)
Grammar	351	(67%)	550	(66.4%)
Spelling	100	(19%)	276	(33.3%)
Total	526	(100%)	856	(100%)

Table 3: Journalists' Self-Assessment of News writing Skills Across Levels of Qualification

Levels of Qualification	Performance Criteria (%)								
	Grammar			Facts			Spelling		
	<i>V.G</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>V.G</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>V.G</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Degree in Journalism	35.3	47.1	11.8	41.2	52.9	0.0%	29.4	52.9	11.8
Degree outside Journalism	17.6	23.5	52.5	5.9	29.4	47.1	23.5	41.2	29.4
Diploma in Journalism	11.8	58.8	23.5	23.5	52.9	11.8	23.5	52.9	17.6
On-the-job Trained	11.8	52.9	23.5	23.5	23.5	35.3	11.8	35.3	41.2

V.G - Very good

F – Fair

P – Poor

Based on the question: Rate the Performance of your colleagues in grammar, facts and spelling across levels of qualification.

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