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BOOK REVIEW

Kareithi, Peter and Nixon Karethi. *Untold Stories: Economics and Business Journalism in African Media*, eds. (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press), 2005, xii + 275 pages

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The business press plays a key role in the overall development of a nation's economy. This is evident in the widespread use of a business press in virtually all developed nations. The necessity of collecting, analyzing and distributing economic data to decision-makers, to individual investors and to the citizenry in general is no longer subject to debate.

This observation in *Untold Stories: Economics and Business Journalism in African Media*, an anthology of write-ups and commentaries from diverse nations of Africa, has gained further significance in this age of globalization and free market economy. In a nutshell, financial and economics journalism reports and observations deal with broad issues. The overall nature of a country's economy is one. Another has to do with economic indicators, such as inflation rate, rate of unemployment, changes in GDP, and trade surplus and deficit. A third concerns national banking, while a fourth focuses on increases and decreases in the stock market. Business journalism per se is primarily concerned with the microeconomic scenario. It concentrates mainly on medium, small and micro enterprises, and, less extensively, on individual big businesses.

Untold Stories is a spin-off from the proceedings of the African Economics Editors Network (AEEN), created in 1999 to improve economics, business and financial journalism in Africa. Its ultimate goal, in the editors' words, "is to improve discourse between the African media, the corporate sector, and African society in general...." Peter Kareithi is a professor of humanities and communication at Pennsylvania State University (USA) and Nixon Kariithi is Head of Media Studies in the School of Literature and Language Studies, University of Witwatersrand (South Africa). The book itself, they claim, "marks an important milestone in the development of African mass media." It might well be, as it also highlights the myriad problems that economics and business journalism in Africa is beset with. These are both institutional and structural: "lack of skills, heavy

dependence on government and other official news sources, ownership and funding challenges, and strained media/state relations." Nonetheless, there is no escaping this sobering assessment on Africa and its problems by the authors: "most of Africa's major problems --- war, poverty, dictatorships, and ethnic hostilities --- have an economics dimension. Consequently, it is paradoxical that economics reporting in African media is generally poor and episodic."

In the process of suggesting ways and means for improving the state of economics and business journalism, the book relates that state in various African countries as told by journalists and scholars. The vast majority of these represents sub-Saharan Africa, and is treated quite extensively, while three Maghreb countries, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, are lumped together, and discussed rather pithily, in a smallish section of Chapter 8, although Egypt also receives attention, again modestly, in a separate chapter (3). The sub-Saharan nations covered include Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, Rwanda, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Cameroon, Tanzania, Zambia, Namibia, Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa. Going through the accounts of these countries' experiences in economics and business journalism, one can get a strong feel for the inadequacies in this field, as well as a variety of endemic reasons contributing to that unsatisfactory state of affairs. Some of them would find resonance in the situation in Bangladesh! For example, as the most thoughtful piece in the book, "Media and the state in Africa: Continuities and discontinuities", written by Francis Nyamnjoh, states in discussing the 'economics of journalism' in Africa:

> Journalists in most countries are not well paid, and are therefore most likely to bargain away in myriad ways their independence, professionalism and ethics, in order to make ends meet. In certain cases, businesses are promised coverage depending on how much they are able to contribute as payment for advertising or simply as a bribe for the media to blackmail reporters.

Matt Mogekwu in "Economics journalism in emerging democracies in Africa: dealing with a difficult terrain" explains some of the innate problems of the profession, outside of the extraneous factors of the kind just mentioned:

> There appears to be a conviction among journalists that economic news is not meant for the masses. And that is where the problem lies.... Business and economic news reporting is not the easiest task for any journalist.... Economic and business stories have a language and vocabulary of their own which are often beyond the

> language experience of the person on the street. Therein lies the dilemma of the economics journalists. The dilemma, incidentally, is twofold: (a) understanding the language and vocabulary, and (b) restructuring it in such a way that it can be understood and made relevant to the readership and listenership of the media across the board.

The problems, indeed, are substantial, and, although the African press goes back more than two centuries to 1800, when the *Cape Town Gazette* newspaper first appeared in South Africa, the continent is beset with a number of dysfunctional elements that have hampered the healthy growth of media and communication: the crisis of understanding, the crisis of power, the crisis of ownership, the crisis of resources, and, most crucially, the crisis of direction (Chapter 1, "Rethinking the African press: Journalism and the democratic process").

And these crises are manifested in the experience of many of the countries discussed. For example, "Egyptians have been trained to distrust the media and this attitude affects sources...." And, "Some African governments would rather trust non-African foreign journalists and media with information about important decisions concerning the states over which they preside, and often at great cost, than honour their own local media with scoops. This naturally implies that, in their opinion, local journalism is second rate." In Ghana, "In effect, economic reporting is living in the shadows of political coverage." And this poignant philosophical lament from a discussant from Swaziland: "In a culture where it is imprinted in the social genetic code not to call the actions of authorities by their real names, and to pull a filter of obfuscation over official dealings, how can journalism exist?" Aside from the hyperbolic rhetoric contained in several articles in this section, the grim picture of the state of economics and business journalism in the continent in general that have been portrayed cannot be swept under the carpet. Nixon Kariithi in "A critical analysis of economics news in the African print media" (Chapter 6), using the methodology of content analysis of nine major publications in nine countries, concludes that there is "no shortage of economics news in the African media." However, the writings in the book temper this optimistic picture with some sobering realities in terms of the press coverage, as well as the background leading up to that coverage, in a number of countries. In addition, the continent is burdened with its history of colonial rule and its legacy.

That legacy bequeaths an experience where all radio, news and information services were wholly in the hands of the colonial governments. Consequently, the

talk about the decline of the free press in the immediate post-colonial Africa was to talk about something that never existed. That would partly explain why repressive regimes justified suppression of freedom of expression with the argument that such freedoms were irrelevant in the face of the massive poverty, disease, illiteracy and underdevelopment in their countries. They had the model of the just-departed colonial rulers fresh in their minds! The long-term consequences for the development of a robust and free media, including economics and business journalism, have been unhealthy. In Ghana, "Mere promoting of official positions litters the pages of the state media and their airwaves. The private press, however, has tended to focus on the stories that generate catchy headlines while relegating 'boring', but necessary, stories to less important pages." And, in Ethiopia, "The sometimes unpleasant relationship between the media, the government and the emerging corporate world" is manifested in the action of "advertisers who regularly threaten to remove their advertising should any story negative to their image appear in a newspaper." That, emphatically, is not conducive to the growth of free, fair and impartial journalism.

Untold Stories makes it clear that not all is doom and gloom in the African economics and business media. At the very least, the picture is uneven across countries, and even within them, as one or two newspapers stand out amidst some shabby or mediocre publications! South Africa, not surprisingly, stands some distance above the rest. As Nyamnjoh states, "the established press in countries such as South Africa and Nigeria is relatively better able to attract enough advertising to guarantee regularity." And Joseph Sesebo is positively upbeat about Nigeria: "The growth of Nigeria's financial press in the last ten years has been tremendous. The depth of reporting, the use of language and the quality of personnel has moved faster than other areas of Nigerian journalism."

"Everyday stories in African economics journalism" (Chapter 9) is as fascinating as it is sobering about the real dangers that journalists in Africa face in the line of duty. The accounts of six journalists from different African countries capture the struggles, encompassing both failures and successes, which they encountered when engaged in their jobs in their respective countries. Reporting on Nigerian financial scam artists, Ugandan banking crisis, national confusion over copper mining privatization plan in Zambia, conflict over water rights project in Lesotho, and problems regarding a diamond mining project in Namibia provide a variety of instances that attest to the life of the economics journalist in action across Africa. And then the story of a senior investigative journalist's murder in Mozambique for prying into corruption in high places in the country's political and

economic system provides a grim perspective on the potential dangers lurking around for the intrepid business and economics journalists.

Untold Stories identifies lack of adequate resources, problems with access to information, and poor training and education of journalists as the major handicaps to the development of economics and business journalism in Africa. Various corrective measures have been suggested in different parts of the book, some a little too grandiose to be realistically efficacious, but Matt Mogekwu's thoughts on the topic are eye-catching because of the home truths they contain:

> The economic journalist must realize that economic news is often meaningless to the readership if it is not in the interpretive mode.... In other words, it is not just what the figures say...that matters. The meaning and consequences of those figures are in fact the crux of the matter.... Thus the challenge facing economics journalists in Africa is not only to be aware and knowledgeable about what is going on, but also to understand the level of public awareness, understanding and needs in order to know how to structure their stories to address their readership directly.

Untold Stories: Economics and Business Journalism in African Media contains some impressive writings highlighting what ails economics and business journalism in Africa, why it is so, and what could be done to ameliorate the situation.