



## **Center for International Media Ethics – CIME Inc.**

### **Journalism Training and Conflict in West Africa.**

**Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum, Bonn, Germany, June 3rd 2008.**

#### **1) Journalism ethics in conflict situations**

Every country depends on media professionals to report the news to inform, educate and entertain their various audiences. Most of us as journalists have found ourselves in situations where we are left with no answers to the numerous questions before us. Especially in conflict situations where the political and security issues are particularly complicated, the ethical questions that come up are not always easy to resolve. For example,

- In Iraq, the controversy over *embedded journalists* pointed straight at the issue of journalism training: are journalists embedded in the U.S army properly trained or allowed to report on the facts objectively in the Iraq war?
- Just these past weeks in Myanmar: is it permissible for international journalists to disseminate media coverage on Myanmar, even though they have been prohibited to do so by the Myanmar authorities?
- In China, leading up to the Beijing Olympics: should the Chinese government grant journalists unlimited access to sources and locations? In cases like Myanmar's or China's, do issues of national sovereignty apply to journalists?
- What of cases when reporters need to be partisan to a given side of the conflict in order to gain access the field? A prime example of this might be in West Africa where the Nigerian government restricts journalists' access to conflict zones in the north of the country. But of course, any explicit partisanship on the part of the journalist will tend to undermine the objectivity of reporting.
- In terms of the security issue in conflict zones, a whole series of questions also arise: what levels of anonymity in reporting are acceptable in order to preserve the journalist's security? This is especially an issue in authoritarian regimes

(including in certain African countries, e.g. under Mugabe or other regimes). And at some point, in collecting critical information, where is the border between reporting and investigative journalism? If a journalist comes across key information on a terrorist attack, for example, he/she might have to choose between protecting sources and protecting a people or a government. How to deal with all these people involved?

These and many other questions have probably been asked to you or your colleagues in the past. Seeking some types of solutions to these issues might even be the rationale behind your coming here today.

The International Federation of Journalists and other organizations have developed over the years many efforts in an attempt to resolve and to initiate reflection over these matters. It is worth mentioning an IFJ poster in one of the meeting rooms of Ghana International Press Center – it is a favorite and it reads like this: **THERE CAN BE NO PRESS FREEDOM IF JOURNALISTS EXIST IN CONDITIONS OF CORRUPTION POVERTY OR FEAR.** The most difficult ethical issues in journalism tend to arise in these conditions of "corruption, poverty or fear" – which are typical of conflict situations, or any difficult situations that a journalist may face because of political strife, low levels of development, etc.

## **2) Typical challenges for journalism training in developing countries**

We strongly believe that gatherings such as the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum will help in making this world a better place for the profession of journalism. The theme of our panel this morning "Journalistic training in conflict-related settings" can be simply put to mean journalistic training in difficult situations. One thing that we might all have in common is that we are trying to find ways of educating journalists in difficult situations or in countries where the environment is not conducive for such training.

Journalists are seen as threat or nuisance for most regimes in the world, especially on the African continent. When we talk about conflict-related situations, it can refer to situations where gun shots are heard and children soldiers are trying their new tools on an innocent population. But there are many types of conflict situations including in areas that are not officially "at war" – for example, during election times. Elections times can be seen in some countries as happy situations bringing about festivities for the winning team. But in other countries, elections times can be really frustrating and even set off violence.

Take one country, Benin: it is a little country of roughly 8.5 million people located in the western part of Africa. It has borders with Nigeria, Togo, Niger, Burkina Faso and the Atlantic Ocean. The majority of the population is still uneducated. There are over fifty political parties each wanting to get to the highest office in the land. Elections there are complicated for a journalist to handle. In the Republic of Benin election times are so fragile and so sensitive and full of tension that a little confusion from one side can easily generate hazardous situations especially when this is from the few leading political parties.

Examples abound of election times triggering violence in many parts of the world: Six years ago, the assassination of law Minister Mushtaq Lone in India installed fear in voters; Last year the Philippines mourned the death of hundreds of innocent victims in local and congressional elections, in which 18 000 positions were being contested; Pakistani former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto' was assassinated nearly six months ago just before the elections; The disputed elections in Kenya with its band of violence and chaotic life for the populations are a few examples of elections triggering violence in many parts of the world. In order to avoid these types of situations, authorities in many countries have focused on journalists and how their training can help mitigate some of the unfortunate consequences of elections situations.

One of the main challenges facing journalists in Benin is the lack of adequate professional training. The country as a whole does not have a communications school that can train people in journalism. The nearest school is in Senegal where most Benin-educated practitioners earned their degree. When CIME's President who is from Benin wanted to learn journalism, he had to move to Ghana and took the challenge of learning a new language (English) before entering Ghana Institute of Journalism

Today, there are two new private schools that offer some type of training for young people who are interested in the field, but at a price that is equivalent to a ten-month salary for most Benin workers. This premium price of tuition puts the profession in danger, especially in a country where most of the population is poor and unemployment rate is high. That puts the "Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuelle et de la Communication (HAAC)", the governmental institution that regulates the media profession in Benin, in a position of having to provide training to journalists especially during the months preceding election times. These training workshops have become in some cases the only formal education that some journalists have been exposed to in the country. During CIME's recent visit to Benin, most of the journalists we met literally begged CIME to bring them more training courses in journalism. The director of the "Maison des Médias" (the main journalists' association in Benin) said during one of our meetings that most people tend to ignore Benin because the country has been known to be relatively peaceful. But that is no reason to disregard proper journalism ethics and training: until the journalists are trained to be professional, they will be unable to handle the fair elections reporting that ensures democracy or the violence that can erupt at any time.

### **3) Radio Ecole Benin: an innovative training initiative**

To conclude, it is worth sharing an example of innovative journalism training in Benin. Faced with the numerous problems enumerated above, a group of professionals got together in Benin to find ways of educating any person interested in the profession but who has no means of paying the high tuition offered by the two private institutions that exist in the country. Through determination, hard work and few donations, these journalists were able to open a school of journalism called Radio-Ecole in the city of Porto-Novo ([www.radioecole-apm.org](http://www.radioecole-apm.org)). Their mission is to provide high-standard

training to students at less or no costs. They rely fully on their own donations and teach the classes themselves with the help of professionals whom they have invited from other parts of the world.

The school defines itself as an "associative structure appropriate for young people aspiring to the media profession". The goal is to teach journalists to function in a competitive media environment where cultural industries and training centers are not available for people from more difficult socio-economic backgrounds. Their website says "we should not forget that Radio, TV and written Press play a very important roles in the life of our society. The awakening to liberty and democracy and the extraordinary effervescence of new media in our continent is a proof that free press can reinforce the process of change and even accelerate history."

The Radio-Ecole/APM has partnerships with associative and community radios of Benin and Togo. Since 2004 it has contributed so far to training more than a hundred students and media professionals. This is a kind of local structure that can be implemented anywhere in the world with some effort and cooperation, to improve training conditions for journalists – especially to equip them to deal with conflict situations.

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