

Book Review

- Title:** Reporting Africa: A Manual for Reporters in Africa
Editors: Don Rowlands and Hugh Lewin
Publishers: Thomson Foundation U.K. and Friedrich Nauman Foundation, Zimbabwe
Date: 1985
Reviewer: Ikechukwu E. Nwosu.

The cover title of this book reminds one of Olav Stokke's (ed.) book with the same title. But this book is different in several ways. In the first place, it is a manual. As edited books, the two books have various contributors. But this book by Rowlands and Lewin made a more conscious effort to publish writings by African authors. The new "Reporting Africa" has more to do with the day-to-day problems and practices of the African reporter. It is not focused on how Africa is reported or portrayed by the media, but on how to report the news in the African context. It is a book for the working journalist. Its practical orientation is unquestionable. It is a book "by and for African journalists." In this age of global information disparity when Africans are beginning to sing a song of self-reliance or self-determination, this contribution to Journalism in Africa is a welcome one.

One lapse that nearly mars the commendable efforts of all contributors to this work is the excessive overlapping or repetition of the same ideas by different authors in the book. Don Rowlands tries to explain this weakness away in an introductory remark when he states: "But none of these authors had a chance to see in advance what his or her colleagues was writing, there are overlaps and some conflicting advice. This is not necessarily a drawback: there are many paths to the mountain-top".

To a certain extent we would agree with this editor's apologia, but greater coordination or collaborative work on the editors and contributors would have removed this weakness or at least reduced it to a minimum. A meeting of all the contributors to the book would have helped. Tighter, critical and cooperative editing by the editors would have also assisted the process. Efforts used in discussing the same topics, or issues in the overlapping areas would have been used for writing other things that are missing in the work. These conflicting overlaps, in addition can confuse the beginning reporter or less critical reporter trying to learn from this book the secrets of goods news reporting in the African context.

Then there is this complete absence of a theoretical framework in the book. This would have helped in many ways. Resting the book solidly on one of the well-known theoretical perspectives like the sociology of News or Newsmaking perspectives, popularised by scholars like Bernard Roschko and Gaye Tuckman would have been an advantage. It would have helped us to understand and appreciate more the ideas and recommendations of the contributors to the book - especially if sufficient effort was made to contextualise whatever theoretical perspective or model that was adopted. True, this is a manual, but a manual is not necessarily a-theoretical, because theory and practice are two sides of the same coin.

However, the point must be made that the above critical points and others that can be made do not destroy the utility and admirable innovative approach adopted in this book's effort to chart a hitherto uncharted horizon - how best to report the news in Africa as seen by most African journalists and experts.

The book opens with an attempt to define news by the Editor of *Media Development*, Michael Traber. He lists and discusses the well-known news values in conventional journalism, and offers alternative news criteria or values for today's reporter. His P+E+RI formula for determining what is news is quite interesting (P = People, E = Events and RI = Readers Interest).

Francis Kasoma of the University of Zambia focuses on the Basic Skills of News Writing in the next chapter. Even though the reader is bored by the unnecessary repetition of the news values reviewed by Traber in chapter One, aspects of this chapter that focused directly on actual news writing styles, are very well done. The abundant African examples he gave, exceedingly strengthens his contribution.

Kasoma's chapter flows in smoothly to Peter Mwaura's chapter on News Writing II which deals with the news story. This chapter is also well written, but less time would have been spent on the well-known 5Ws and H model of news writing. His call for effective communication in the news

story whether in radio, newspaper or news agency reporting is quite in order.

Paul Ansah, Director of the School of Communication Studies, University of Ghana, follows up with a chapter on news sources. He handles quite masterly the reporter's environment, contacts, source protection and dealing with sources, as well as how to use non-human sources of news like reference works. This chapter will certainly benefit from a detailed discussion of the problems of access to these sources which the African reporter must face.

T. Nelson William of Liberia examines interviewing as a reportorial genre and tool for news gathering. His contribution is a good how-to-do-it piece on journalistic interviewing and a good assessment of the problems the reporter would face in the African context in trying to use interviewing to gather news. Nelson's piece is followed immediately by Edward Mamutse's (Zimbabwe) contribution, which examines the importance of district or rural coverage. Moving away from the rural areas Francis Kasoma, in his second contribution, provides an insight into the problems, prospects and techniques for successful reporting of the towns or urban areas in Africa.

Moving into the legalities of news reporting, Tim Nyahunzui of the Zimbabwe Institute of Mass Communication and his associate Geoff Feltoe of the University of Zimbabwe Faculty of Law analyse systematically the various aspects of the law and the court which a reporter must learn how to work with. This is, no doubt, one of the most useful contributions in this book. Court reporting is still a very underdeveloped area in the African news business. This is followed by the chapter on how to report economic and financial matters by Ruth Weiss, an area that is even more underdeveloped than court reporting. She makes it sound so simple and interesting that African reporters who have been shying away from this area of news reporting might become interested after reading her contribution.

Then comes the chapter on feature and magazine writing by Juby Mayet which, in the view of this reviewer, does not seem to belong to this book, even though it is excellently written and instructive. It seems rather presumptuous and unfair to try to dismiss features and magazine writing (a whole class of journalism by itself) in one chapter of a news reporting manual. The chapter on Women Journalism, by Elizabeth Ohene, also seems to be an appendage or visitor to the book which is essentially a practical reporting manual. For sure it has some message and utility value for reporters and reporting: but most other even more directly relevant topics or issues to news reporting could have qualified by the same token rendering the book impotent as a reporters manual or driving it away from

its focus. Her advice on how to handle the women's page, fashion and beauty, advice columns and peculiar women journalists problems are quite interesting and useful. But they seem more suited in a text book on general journalism or newspaper publishing—not a news reporting manual.

Gerald Siwela's contribution on news writing for radio and television is well handled. His point that news is news no matter in which media it finds itself is well made and served as a good foundation on which his eventual examination of the various peculiarities of radio/television news writing rests. This is another very good how-to-do-it piece and we dare say that this book would not have been complete without this chapter. Another quite useful but rather short chapter on news agency journalism by Paul Fauvet follows this electronic news chapter. Drawing from his rich experience and the literature on this subject, the author takes the reader through an insightful explanation of the vital differences between writing for a news agency and other media, the special problems in news agency reporting, the role of the Non-Aligned Pool, PANA; while offering many practical examples.

Reporting Africa ends well with a quite instructive chapter on the use of pictures in news reporting by Mohamed Amin of Camerapix Nairobi. This is a well-illustrated contribution that carries the useful advice that one does not have to be a great photographer to take good news pictures. Systematically, easily and in a practical manner, the author lets the reader into the secrets of taking good news pictures, effective use of the camera, picture research, caption writing, and maintaining good taste in news photography. This is a chapter that can stand the test of time anywhere.

All in all then, this book is a mouthful on journalistic news reporting for various mass media in the African context. With fourteen chapters and a powerful foreword by the Hon. Dr. N.M. Shamuyarira, the Zimbabwean Minister of Information, Posts and Telecommunications, it is a text that is highly recommended for all schools of Journalism and Communication institutions in and outside Africa.*

**Reporting Africa* is available through the African Council on Communication Education.