



## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Elements of Journalism**

BILL KOVACH AND TOM ROSENSTIEL

NEW YORK: Crown Publishers, 2007

269 pp., US\$14.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0307346704

**Reviewers: Peter, Ada Sonia, Ph.D. and Ekeanyanwu, Nnamdi T., Ph.D.**

(Department of Mass Communication, Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria)

The book “*The Elements of Journalism*” written by Kovach and Rosenstiel attempts to propagate the ‘ideal’ elements of journalism. What this book captures better than any single book on the practice and principles of journalism is the weaving together reasons and scenarios why media audiences have fled and why new technology and large corporate ownership are putting journalism at risk. The book is also a product of interaction with practicing journalists under the auspices of the “Committee of Concerned Journalists Traveling Curriculum” in the United States. Written in eleven chapters, the book attempts to weave in the various strands and argument, alas, within the United States alone, on what constitutes elements of journalism, why they are controversial and what is practicable within the book’s geographic area of coverage.

Kovach and Rosenstiel’s explanation and position on each element are concise gems, filled with insights but

not likely to be considered axiomatic in other contexts outside of the United States or similar geographic settings. The book explains in details the ideal core principles “supposedly” shared by journalists across media, even across cultures. These principles flow from the essential function news play in people’s lives. This new edition is completely updated and includes a new 10th principle (haven explained 9 principles of journalism in the first edition) - the rights and responsibilities of citizens - flowing from new power conveyed by technology to the citizen as a consumer and editor of their own news and information.

According to the proposition in the book, “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth. Its first loyalty is to citizens. Its essence is a discipline of verification. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover. It must serve as an independent monitor of power. It must provide a forum for public

criticism and compromise. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant. It must keep the news comprehensive and in proportion. Its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience. Citizens, too have rights and responsibilities when it comes to news". As good as the foregoing may look; we perceive more than half of these journalism ideals as "unrealistic" in an era where technology has created a new economic and cultural organization of journalism. An era where alternative media are exploding and are increasingly performing functions previously reserved to the formal/traditional press.

Going down memory lane with obvious scenarios and events in different parts of the globe, these ideals proposed by Kovach and Rosenstiel have only succeeded in denoting an art that does not attempt to represent external, recognizable reality. In essence, sixty percent (enough percentage to raise questions) of these ideals have never really worked in any known context. This is why we regard them as mere "*fantasy*" elements of journalism.

Futuristically, the Internet is clearly enriching the public sphere in other ways. While it may not yet support the more costly forms of journalism, it offers a vast range of opinion, reduces the barriers to entry for individual writers and new publications, and facilitates the growth of collaborative, non-market

production online, as exemplified by such phenomena as open-source software and Wiki publications. These new forms of social production have already begun to serve some of the classic watchdog functions of the press without the propounded ideal of journalism. Look at social media networks for example. They are changing the facts and the face of journalism all over the world. There are persons today who rely on such platforms for their daily news and other journalistic needs.

As Yochai Benkler (2006) has argued, the network information economy offers a platform for the public sphere that is in many respects superior to the platform created by the mass media. By reducing the cost of becoming a speaker, the Internet has enabled far greater numbers of people to enter the public debate. Furthermore, instead of simply becoming a cacophonous "Tower of Babel" or a series of echo chambers of fragmented and polarized views, the Web has developed a variety of peer-produced mechanisms for filtering and evaluating facts and opinions and organizing public discussion at higher levels. The promise of new political and cultural creativity is extraordinary, but technology alone does not guarantee that the potential will be realized. Some of the new developments are deeply threatening to established interests, which may use their political influence to bend law and regulation to their own advantage.

Futuristically, the journalism profession must admit the existence of her *covered up wounds* in her mode of operations.

From a global perspective, these ideals *pay lip service* to the profession and the public. Sometimes they hypnotise the unsuspecting public about the morass in the industry and paint an artiste's picture of infallibility of the journalism profession. Moreover, the authors' views promote Eurocentrism and justify the United States model of market-oriented, superficially objective journalism as the "perfect" journalism. If the United States' style journalism were the ideal journalism, the criticisms against CNN and the western media as agents of western capitalism and domination and manipulator of reality in favour of American interests would not have found prominence in literature in the subject area.

Again, the 'ideal' principles and purpose of journalism highlighted by Kovach and Rosenstiel are in our view too simplistic to capture the complex issues surrounding the art of journalism. One of such issues glossed over in the book is "Journalism's 1<sup>st</sup> loyalty is to citizens" (p. 52). Is it to the citizens of the state, of the nation, or of the globe? In essence, is the public, the citizens and the media audience the same? If they are the same, why the hubbub about who sets the 'public

agenda', 'media agenda' and whose opinion is 'public opinion'?

Further complexities that the idealist authors must consider before highlighting such a vague element include who defines and decides on what information the citizens' need. Is it Journalism or the Journalist? *Or...?* How is this decision reached? What is the feasibility of meeting the needs of every citizen? Is the point of deciding for one citizen not disloyalty to another citizen? Do we still talk about National Citizenship in a globalised media world? Should citizenship be contextualized? Many questions that the book failed to answer. Interestingly, Kovach and Rosenstiel implicitly unveiled the unrealistic nature of this element of loyalty to citizens using their Theory of Interlocking Public (p. 24). That Journalism first obligation is to the truth (p. 36) also readily springs up questions about truth. What is truth? What is truth to an American Soldier in Iraq may be a blatant lie painted with truth to an Iranian or to Iraqis if the Theory of Interlocking public is put into perspective.

The realistic 'Journalist' first obligation should be "the contextual truth". Meaning obligation to how much he knows. The argument here is that the information a journalist has about a news event may not be the actual truth of the event. Thus, the journalist is obligated to report the contextual truth at his disposal. A video of mayhem captures only the contextual truth since it omits the

visuals of the actual cause as well as the events left out when recording ended. Another instance is, a wrong document handed over to a journalist as the evidence on a topical global issue. The journalist goes ahead to capture the other side of the story to create a balance. The journalist publishes this news. Do we applaud the journalist for reporting the actual truth? The journalist simply reported the contextual truth at his disposal not the actual truth. This leads to the query about the journalism element of verification. The journalist verifies to the extent to which his subjectivity allows him. These unconscious and conscious practices began with Gutenberg's printing press and a host of social, political and economic changes in Western Europe that provided the conditions necessary for the emergence of a periodic news press in the 17th century.

Another major flaw of the book *The Elements of Journalism* is the thought gap between the *book title* and the *content*. The book content failed to deliver on the promises of the book title. Contrary to the make-believe global journalistic scenario created by the title, the content was essentially based on the ideal element of journalism in economically developed democracies. Thus, the questions on the ideal elements of journalism in developing economies remain unanswered. The assumption that other approaches are inferior has dampened intellectual curiosity

about the practice of journalism in other parts of the world. An example of such aberration within the content of this book includes the authors' assertion that journalism and democracy were born together (p. 247).

Contrary to their assertion, in many other countries, journalism and other forms of government were born together. We must have another name for what the journalist in those countries practiced before the adoption of democracy as a system of government. Kovach and Rosenstiel must bear in mind that, Anglo-American system of government is not the world's system of government. History contradicts this line of thought. It is risky to adopt this assertion for the sake of future generation of journalists.

On one hand, democratic journalism as presented in the book is simply denoting an art that does not attempt to represent external, recognizable reality anywhere even in the acclaimed western libertarian press system. What is democratic about informing the audience of some information and leaving other information out? What is democratic about deciding for the audience what they need when they have not vetoed their power to the establishment of the media house?

For there to be genuine popular rule, there must be more than a contest among elites for popular favour. In this view, democratic principles

ought to apply not simply to elections, but also between the media and the public, where the public can be, not just a phantom of our imagination, but the real force in decision making that the democratic tradition has said it should be. There is nothing democratic about what we say for what we have said betrays us to the “oppressed word”.

On the other hand, there is nothing democratic about our decision for what we have decided to do is a clear mark of oppressing some other decision. What is democratic about Agenda setting power of the media? What is democratic about deciding what goes on air and what does not? The fact that journalism permits the journalist to decide on behalf of the audience what might be of interest to the public makes journalism innately autocratic.

Unaddressed within the book’s content is the inevitability of practitioners to maintain independence from those they cover and must serve as an independent monitor of power. The element also sounds ideal but unrealistic. The journalists in the Middle East are required to submit stories on sensitive military issues to the government for approval. Yes, many countries will espouse independence from those they cover. However, in countries without an Islamist government such as Egypt, it can be a crime to “insult” the country on any form of media (new or old). This limits what the media can report.

Even in the United States, the independent monitor of power remains a dream for the distant future amongst the *Big Four News Agencies*. One begins to wonder where the authors’ ideals are drawn from. Are these ideals from past journalism, present journalism, or for future journalism? Kovach and Rosenstiel’s ideals may not thrive now or later in a generation surrounded by technological surge, especially in a context that is drawn closer by technology yet maintains complex multiplicity of values and differences.

Notwithstanding our argument that some of the issues raised in “*The Elements of Journalism*” may be controversial and debatable; this book represents a good reference material for “what newspeople should know and the public should expect” from media professionals involved in the news production business. For instance, it is interesting to observe the debate about “objectivity” not being a practicable element of journalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rather, the authors of the book argue for “transparency” as a possible replacement of this element.

Journalism is for the public good and a business concern. It must survive businesswise to remain useful to the public that is unwilling to support its life span. In essence, the elements discussed in this book, no doubt, are starting points into the business of

journalism meant to keep it afloat and relevant beyond this age.

Another enriching element of this book is the attempt to weave the diverse views of practicing journalists in this updated version. Even if we have argued the controversial nature of these elements and pointed out the gaps and undercurrents that were not adequately placed in context or

perspective; the perception of practitioners that some of these elements are “workable” is worth our attention.

## **REFERENCES**

- Yochai, B. (2006). *The wealth of networks: How social production transform markets and freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press