

The reporter's guide to Investigative Journalism



Edited by

Victor Ayedun-Aluma

Steve Aborisade

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Investigative Journalism

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Victor Ayedun-Ahmed and Aye Abiorhwa



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Published 2008

By Wole Soyinka Investigative Reporting Award (WSIRA)

www.wsira.org

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ISBN: 978-2906-45-X

Printed by Polygraphics Ventures Limited, Ibadan

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Acknowledgements

Dapo Olorunyomi

Deep appreciation to:

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the British High Commission for graciously providing grant to host a capacity development training on investigative reporting that provided a platform for robust exchange of ideas. And, again to CIDA for funding the publication of this book.

To the following people, for helping chart initial outline and contributing their thoughts for this effort:

Odia Ofeimun, Lanre Idowu, Umaru Pate, Lai Oso, Lanre Arogundade, Ibim Semenitari, Sam Omatseye, Boye Ola, Doyin Mahmoud, Dapo Olorunyomi, Philips Ujomu, Femi Aborisade, Kabir Sheu, Kingsley Uranta, Jiti Ogunye, Akin Akingbulu and Sola Olorunyomi.

To our contributors, we say a big thank you. To others whose names may not appear here, your intangible efforts are fully acknowledged.

Steve Aborisade (WSIRA)

Foreword

Dapo Olorunyomi

In periods of extreme moral and social crises, the media have played, and continue to initiate, major options in the restoration of values and standards of public (and indeed private) policy management. This is what the watchdog role of the media has always meant.

In a democracy, however, these roles are not perfunctory; they assume a statutory character in part by treaty obligation and by constitutional as well as case law references. This watchdog role is embedded and codified in the practice of investigative reporting through which officials are held in strict accountability via a process of very rigorous scrutiny.

The belief that power corrupts, that corruption sickens the soul of a society, and saps it of the will for growth and development, needs no better illustration than in the story and history of public, as indeed private, sector management of the country.

Investigative reporting, which is so badly needed in our country today, is sadly in retreat as a consistent, active, newsroom strategy of engaging with the miasma of governance in the land. From an increasing consciousness of oversight function, through internal ethical challenge in the media itself, to critical issues like the receding prominence of investigative skills development in the curriculum system of our journalism schools, the truth is that blame can go round, even though what we need is not a blame game but a way out of the problem.

WSIRA'S guidebook therefore fits properly into the complex milieu of recreating and prospecting challenges of moral collapse and investigative failure in our newsrooms. It is a sound rendition of thoughtful reflections and guidelines on how to understand the context of our media practice, and how to salvage it through better journalism.

Without doubt, this is about the best product of its type in the shelves today and the hope of all friends of our media is that it will find good use for the great value it brings.

Dapo Olorunyomi is a distinguished journalist and human rights activist.

introduction

Steve Aborisade & Victor Ayedun-Aluma

Having played a key role in ending decades of dictatorship, the Nigerian media is well-placed to be a force for democratic reform in the nation. Against this background, efforts to promote good governance in Nigeria must involve capacity building for the Nigerian media. This point requires emphasis since practitioners are agreed that a lack of professionalism hinders the media from being a force for social renewal. We add that the lack of an established tradition of investigative journalism limits the effectiveness of the media as watchdogs, particularly in issues of corruption and the abuse of human rights. This book represents our contribution to strengthening the practice of investigative reporting in Nigeria by serving as a practical guide for journalists.

While journalism has been practised in Nigeria for more than a century, few books have been published on investigative journalism. This book is a spin-off of the Wole Soyinka Investigative Reporting Award's (WSIRA) programme. WSIRA promotes the investigative form of journalism in Nigeria by instituting annual awards for excellence in investigative reporting.

The book is designed for use by journalists, would-be journalists and journalism trainers. It contains expositions and advice on investigative journalism topics relevant to the Nigerian environment. The contributors are practitioners and teachers of journalism active in Nigeria today. They are drawn from reputable public and private universities in Nigeria. The contributors bring to bear their long and varied professional exposure in the print and electronic media, as well as their international training.

The book contains ten chapters and one annex. The chapters deal with five thematic issues, namely: the meanings and histories, the social framework, the personal qualities, the technique and technologies, and the experiences of investigative journalism and journalists. Chapter One is a review of the main conceptualisations of investigative journalism. It ends with a synthesised definition of investigative journalism. Chapter Two contains outlines of the evolution of investigative journalism practice in the UK, the US, Canada and South Africa and ends with some general observations on the motivation for investigative journalism.

Chapters Three, Four and Five analyse the social framework of the investigative journalist in Nigeria. In Chapter Three, a comprehensive and interpretive map of the Nigerian society is drawn. The author presents an argument for its use as a sort of 'road map' for the investigative journalist's journeying on the Nigerian *socioscape*. Chapter Four is a discussion of the major issues and challenges facing the investigative journalist in contemporary Nigeria from a political economy perspective. In this view, the top issues are corruption, citizen rights and consumer rights; while the key challenges are ownership and control, and the imperatives of the market. And, in Chapter Five, a comprehensive review of the constraints on the investigative journalist is presented. The review identifies and discusses constraints in the areas of policy, culture/traditions, finance, ethics, technology, and institutions. And the author concludes with the view that the primary responsibility for negotiating and overcoming these constraints lies with journalists as a group.

The personal qualities and principles of an effective investigative journalist are discussed in Chapter Six. The author identifies and counsels on fourteen qualities and ten principles that the investigative journalist should have in order to be effective. In Chapters Seven through Nine, the issues of technique and technologies are explored. In Chapter Seven, the authors discuss the issues that pertain to how the investigative reporter gets the story. They offer advice on criteria for identifying prospective investigative stories, managing news sources, and conducting investigations in an ethical manner. Chapter Eight dwells on the issues of investigative storytelling and writing. The discussion deals with these issues of technique against the backdrop of a four-step process of investigative storytelling. In Chapter Nine, the issues of digital technologies for the investigative reporter are discussed. The contributor identifies six of such technologies, discusses their utility for the investigative journalist and emphasises the fact that they constitute examples of computer-mediated communication.

Chapter Ten is a narrative of the experiences of six Nigerian investigative reporters. Through interviews with the reporters, the contributor presents information on the making of such prize-winning stories as Dele Agekameh's series on carjacking between Nigeria and Benin Republic, Deji Badmus's story on the Police Equipment Fund, and Emmanuel Mayah's two-part story on exploitative conditions of work in some Asian-owned establishments in Nigeria.

The annex is a list of seventy-seven websites. The websites are an invaluable source of information for Nigerian investigative journalists looking to network professionally, get further training, get funding for their investigative projects, trawl useful databases, or obtain general information.

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Computer-Mediated Communication and the Investigative Journalist

Sola Olorunoyomi

9

Overview

This presentation attempts to show how Computer Assisted Reporting (CAR) can only be properly grasped within the broader context of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). It highlights the relationship between mass communication in general and CMC in particular, enumerates the types of CMC already being incorporated into mainstream media practice, and makes some observations on the current trends and future prospects of CMC and CAR in Nigeria. This paper particularly calls attention to the current and best practices of CAR in the Nigerian newsroom.

It is helpful to give a broad outline of how the computer functions, especially for data processing. There are two major parts of any computer: the hardware and the software. The hardware implies the physical components as distinct from the software which is information that the computer processes. To understand how a computer functions, it is necessary to imagine the "on" and "off" relay switch. Data are processed

in the computer by a binary numbering system which consists of two possible digits, such as "0" and "1", in the manner of the alternate relay switch just described. The "0" may be said to represent the switch in "off" position while "1" is the "on" position. When an electric current flows in the system "it encounters these switches (called *relays* or *gates*), which are either open or closed. The combination of open and closed gates represents information, such as numbers and letters." (Bittner, 1989: 286) There are a number of means from which input data can be fed into the computer: more often through a keyboard, but sometimes also via a floppy disc, an optical scanner, a flash drive, camera or magnetic tape, among others. The core of the computer is the Central Processing Unit (CPU) which helps to read and interpret instruction in a computer program. It also has two memory systems: the read-only memory (ROM) and the random-access memory (RAM). While ROM cannot be altered, RAM can, such that when we switch off power, only RAM erases. To get the computer functioning as a communication gadget, we have to connect its modem to a telephone, wired or wireless. A deeper understanding of the computer system requires us seeking more expert guidance. This is highly advised and the challenge can be taken up in our spare time.

Mediated Communication

Journalism is mediated communication *par excellence*. The work of the journalist makes her a technology buff. From the covering of an event through its conversion into a story to its transmission to radio or television receivers, journalists know that the place of the latest technology for getting the work done is virtually non-negotiable. It is this array of equipment that, indeed, defines and characterises the profession. There will be nothing mass about journalism if it didn't have the benefit of the technology of the electronic channel.

It used to be easy to answer the question of what constituted mediated communication. One simply pointed to the mass media. But the scenario has changed in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) age. If mediated communication is defined as any form of communication which primarily utilizes the technology of the electronic channel, then ideal-typically the mass media are today only one branch of the form. The other branch is what is known as computer-mediated communication, or CMC. CMC is becoming characteristic of the ICT age. It involves person-

to-person interactive communication via networked computer environments. Absent from it is the normative linearity of mass communication where information flow is in one direction and technologically impersonal. In fact, what CMC fantastically improves is the spring of the feedback loop, whose resilience of coil and pace of emergence have often been remarked upon for their slackness in mass media practice. One is not of course advancing the view of strict technological determinism, or that variant of it which postulates, *à la* McLuhan, that the medium is the message. But it is realistic to expect that the material culture of media practice would impinge in a profound way on the ideology of public discourse and, among other things, help to shape it as a site of social organisation.

CMC and the Mass Media: A Convergence?

The distinction drawn above between CMC and the mass media seems contrived in the face of recent developments in the communication world. It is obvious now that media practice is being reorganised to take advantage of the feedback immediacies made possible by CMC. For instance, no newspaper, magazine, television or radio station worth the salt operates today without a full-fledged online presence. What is more, it is not possible to do competitive advertising and not co-opt SMS, email, and domain presence. Media houses and their sponsors have migrated *en masse* to the virtual world, where more and more people meet to form communities of discourse and interaction.

Such is the nature of this reorganization that the old newsroom is fast becoming obsolete. Journalists do and coordinate their work through CMC. They meet their contacts, access archives, conduct interviews, monitor events, prepare their reports, and publish the final package online. And on the media website care is taken to ensure that the virtual audience can make its presence felt. As opposed to just receiving information and observing the debate among journalists, the media audience on the Internet is empowered to post its contributions in a very swift way, and sometimes a platform is provided for this audience to create and disseminate reports and packages on media website. Furthermore, online media archiving can be taken as the norm in the industry. What this means, for instance, is that researching media content is a task that is more easily done through online

access, and it is becoming more reliable to gauge readership by monitoring the number and duration of online visits.

Time was when the only option left for the reporter in Nigeria was her pen and paper; the tape recorder was a sheer privilege. The intervening years have however altered this scenario such that both indoor and outdoor assignments of the reporter have substantially utilised the CMC. From the outset of conceptualising a story the reporter can now organise data, schedule interview, reference material and actually recall materials in the process of performing her job. This speaks simultaneously to the print and electronic media reporter. It is no longer the physical presence of the bullying editor, as reported of the Nigerian newsroom of the early twentieth century, who bestrode the hallway shouting orders on the next story line. A casual visit to, or observation of the practices of Nigerian magazines such as *The News and Tell*, and newspapers like *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *Punch* and *ThisDay*, among others, reveal an electronic interface in newsroom management. The possibility of wireless access has even deepened this practice such that the reporter on site or even at home continuously dialogues with her editor through email, text messages and, a little earlier, the pager.

This interface is perhaps even more striking on radio and in our television stations such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Channels TV and Africa Independent Television (AIT). NTA, for one, is a national network, with substations, in the 36 states of the country, and Abuja. It is primarily computer-assisted through the CMC to initiate and organise programming. Along with the Federal Radio Corporation, it conducts in-house programme schedule, parade and cast via CAR. Ranging from sports to politics and environment report, we now witness a definite shift (in varying degrees) from the procedure of the manual to electronic and, sometimes, automated processing. There is a sense in which we may say that reel time has now converged with real time when we get those aviation and other traffic reports, and even weather updates.

Forms of CMC for CAR

CMC assists the reportorial duty in several ways, and with several means; therefore, it is helpful to shed some light on how it works. The reporter must note that one way to classify the forms of CMC is in terms of their time-orientation. Along this line two broad forms can be identified, namely

synchronous and *asynchronous* CMC. These are by no means complicated concepts or practices. The former entails real time interaction. Each participant is immediately a sender and a receiver of information. Asynchronous CMC involves delays and turn-taking. Central to both, however, is the feedback feature. It is clear that without that feature, no media practice can be said to be CMC-driven. A few examples are given below to show types of CMC which journalists can easily co-opt, as integral to CAR.

Email

This is asynchronous. It involves sending addressable messages to a person connected to the Internet or the network. Email can be used by the reporter to communicate with colleagues on and off the beat and make contacts with potential news sources. The circulation may be multiple such that in the same instant it is possible to reach a large number of recipients. Other documents may be attached with the message. Increasingly we can use the email to conduct extensive interviews, and with the additional value of clarity of expression which had sometimes been compromised by audio quality of some recorders. Sometimes the reporter is confronted by fastidious interviewees who insist on being correctly quoted. The email provides us with the opportunity of sending previously transcribed texts back and forth for possible correction of errors.

The utility of the email is illustrated by a personal experience of the author's. The author recalls how the editor of *The Guardian on Sunday*, Mr. Jahman Anikulapo, had to practically run the week's production in Lagos from Accra during the 2006 premier edition of *Real Life*, A Pan-African Festival of Documentary Films. To ensure that the newspaper went to bed without hitch he got in constant touch with his line editors both by phone and email, sometimes even suggesting visual concepts through page-planning for production.

Perhaps the most adventurous CAR-driven investigative journalism was the 1999 incident when Alhaji Salisu Buhari, then Speaker of the House of Representatives, was investigated for false declaration of age and educational qualification. Ayo Olukotun and Dele Seteolu revealed this much about the incident:

In the best tradition of investigative journalism, *The News* thoroughly researched Buhari's claims about his age, which was

lower than what the constitution stipulated for the office he now held; as well as debunked his claims to have attended the University of Toronto. The American angle of the research was conducted by Dapo Olorunyomi who had lived in the U.S on exile, since 1996 as well as Kunle Ajibade, who was also in the U.S to recuperate, after his release from a 3-year detention (interview, Kabir, Ajibade). Entitled "The Crook in the House," the story was on the cover edition of 12 July 1999. The nation was aghast. Other newspapers and magazines as well as human rights groups across the country enlisted in the moral crusade to get justice. *The News* followed up its scoop by another cover story on 26 July, entitled "BuhariGate - An Inside Story." Neither was it deterred by the purchase by Buhari or his supporters, of virtually all the copies of *The News* which originally came out with the story, in Abuja, the Federal Capital. It was a gimmick, too late, for the issue had been put on the national agenda. As a result of the media's watchdog role, Buhari on 22nd July dropped his bravado, pleaded guilty to the allegations and resigned his office; thus paving the way for his prosecution. (Olukotun and Seteolu, 2001)

Let us also add that this, to some degree, buttresses the significance of CMC and Computer Assisted Report (CAR).

Chat and Instant Messaging (IM)

These are synchronous. Internet Relay Chat (IRC) allows a large number of users to log on to a website and interact in real time. Users of IRC often adopt a nickname while in the online chat room. They may leave the forum to pick up the thread next time they are on the net. A reporter or even a media house may use IRC as a site for popular or expert debate. Instant Messaging is more restricted. The real-time connection that is established is between two computers, so the interaction that goes on in IM is more like a 'conversation' as opposed to the (IRC) 'forum'. IM involves contacting the other party, who must be on the same service network in order to set the conversation rolling. It may be suitable for 'meeting with' colleagues on the job and contacts. For ethical consideration this is usually preceded by the reporter seeking the approval of the target source of interaction.

Bulletin Board System

This is almost the asynchronous version of the chat room. But it is a more restricted discussion forum. Using BBS, information on a specified topic may be sent to a select board of people, and as they each make their responses, these are made available to everybody on the board. The BBS may be hosted on a website, meaning that members of the discussion visit the site to make their contributions. It is possible to organize the BBS using a listserv, that is, a discussion group served through email. Here discussion messages are posted to email addresses, and the responses that are generated are sent to every address on the list. A media organisation may provide this platform on its website in order to stimulate discussion of topical issues. The content thus produced could cover a broad spectrum of positions and analyses, and may help establish—as well as emphasise—a place for the media outfit in the public sphere.

Audio-Video Conferencing

This is the real-time Internet service *par excellence*. Visual and auditory channels of communication are utilized for the purpose of conducting live interactions over the Internet between two or more people. The computers that are used in such conferences have to be capable of multimedia operations. A properly built-up apparatus of simple cameras and computers with microphones would work well in this regard. Audio-video conferencing might be used by a media house for conducting interviews and reports across the divide of time and space and beaming same to television receivers, while other computers on the net may have access to the production. This is still the least used in news casting in Nigeria, but there are prospects for improvement with the increasing innovations being introduced, particularly, by Channels Television, Africa Independent Television (AIT) and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA).

The Blog

Media professionals are increasingly using the blog as a means of interacting intimately with their audience. The blog is an asynchronous personal journal or diary on the web. It is frequently updated and invites the reader into the daily world of the blogger. Journalists use the blog for self-publication. Here they treat the issues that are of interest to them, and they fill up their

columns without the goad of deadlines. Blogs usually have a space for the reader to make her comments, and the blogger is responsible for moderating the different forums that may be going on simultaneously.

Telephone

The use of telephone is usually less discussed, partly because we have become acculturated to it. Yet it can be used with computers, as mobile handsets, or even as a computer. The case of the trio of Nigerian scammers who defrauded the Brazilian Bank, *Banco*, is instructive as a CAR-driven investigation. The three: Nwude Odinigwe, Ikechuwku Christian Anajemba and Amaka Anajemba had posed respectively as Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Deputy Governor and wife of the CBN Deputy Governor. At the end of the day, the agent of *Banco* of Brazil, Mr Nelson Sakaguchi got his bank swindled of \$181.6 million! *The News* magazine of Nigeria swung into action to unravel the mystery through its reporter, Bamidele Adebayo. It deployed a combination of CMC and telephone facilities, at the end of which it got an interview with the star witness, Mr Sakaguchi. In its edition of October 9, 2001, the reporter wrote:

The stung Brazilian requires help for the recovery of 181 million Dollar plus the accrued compound interests of \$70 million. Whether he can get the money from the Nigerian crooks will be an acid test of Nigeria's avowed war against the 419ers, giving our nation bad name internationally.

Last week, when we spoke with Nwude Odinigwe on his role in this monumental fraud, he pestered us to enter a deal with him to kill the story. When we persisted that he must speak on his role, he offered a taciturn response: "I am not in the mood to talk now. All I can say is that the person that can speak about the matter is dead," a reference to his partner who died in circumstances very mysterious. *The News* also spoke with Sakaguchi where he was holed [up] in Africa. He said he would only talk after getting clarifications from his contacts in Nigeria. He promised to get back to us. He never did. (Adebayo, 2001)

What are the prospects?

The Internet is the new oracle so we have to attend to it with plenty of critical awareness. Crucial as digital education is, it is not enough to be net-savvy in the technological sense alone. Understanding the nature and

potentiality of CMC for CAR is the crux of the matter. In the Nigerian context, the first point is to note that the various types of CMC are tools that can be utilized for mass and inter-personal communication, and their use and abuse by expert media professionals as well as by persons with little training in journalism are well attested. There is a need for background and hands-on training on the procedures of computer culture. This training could attend to some of the areas outlined below.

Basic word-processing and data management that will expose reporters to the vast possibilities and advanced features of programs like Microsoft Word, Word Perfect, Lotus and Excel; other possibilities will include knowing how to use the email, and an introduction to web site development. After such training, the participating journalists could be asked to develop simple web sites or to embark on a guided search.

The networking phase could concentrate on the principles and workings of search engines, local area networks (LAN), wide area networks (WAN) and the mechanics of data and file transfer protocols in the context of the Internet and Intranet. This should be geared to assisting the participants to use the medium to improve on their practices as media men and women. Sometimes we are in the dark as to how to approach a subject matter, identify an important source or simply get around our story. At such moments, remember that there is now an infinite multiplicity of electronic resources, and the Internet is one such friend. It however requires appropriate word combination to enhance the search engine and be spared of a deluge of irrelevant data. We can always resort to the help section of the computer and look up instructions that will get us out of the specific trough.

Another area could be the needs of the media such as supporting the development of software that will speak to the specific needs of journalists in Nigeria. One way out is to support the process of building an electronic resource base that is not only development-oriented but responsive to the history and development of the profession in Nigeria.

We must be reminded that CMC tools and their media products seem more susceptible to source abuse and receiver indiscriminatio. Part of the problem is the fact that the scepticism that first attended the Internet on its inauguration has been undermined by the endorsement it has received from the migration of virtually all of 'mainstream' media activity to that site. The common belief now is that the Internet has reduced the distance

between people and information by making the latter just 'one click away'. But information is not interpretation, and the Internet makes available to us much of the most outrageous news we will ever find. What is more, CMC tools and the Internet allow for media intrusion to a depth never thought possible. So just as we are becoming expert users of CMC terms - from mouse to virus to blogosphere - and expert producers and recipients of media content that are CMC-driven, we have to acquire the skills that will make us critical and discriminating as we navigate cyber terrain where the easy distinctions that were hitherto drawn between the ideal-typical public sphere and other domains of discourse have been overruled.

It is an axiom of information theory that choice is the criterion for establishing meaning. The inundation that one experiences on the web calls for the exercise of choice - that is, critical selectiveness - otherwise, there will be no meaning derivable from web experience. The interdisciplinary apparatus that have been applied to mainstream media practice and the reporter's beat over the years are being sharpened for the purpose of engaging media practice in the world of virtual reality.

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