Jonathan O. Chimakonam
Edwin Etieyibo
Ike Odimegwu   *Editors*

Essays on Contemporary Issues in African Philosophy

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How to Report on War in the Light of an African Ethic

Thaddeus Metz

1 Introduction

Theorization of media ethics in the light of characteristic sub-Saharan moral values has begun to sprout, with a handful of thinkers over the past 20 years having provided principled accounts of the ways African ethics might inform journalistic practice (Kasoma 1996; Blankenberg 1999; Fackler 2003; Christians 2004; Shaw 2009; Sesanti 2010; Skjerdal 2012; Chasi 2014).[1] However, the literature on what an African morality entails for the proper ways to report on war is miniscule, with there apparently being only one article-length discussion (Chasi 2016). In addition, the literature insofar as it has a bearing on wartime reporting has implications that many readers will find counterintuitive. For example, some have suggested that African morality demands loyalty to one's in-group, which appears to require 'patriotic' journalism, downplaying the revelation of the truth in favour of one's country, right or wrong. Others have contended that African morality means that journalists may not be distanced from their sources, who should rather be participants, which in a wartime context prescribes 'embedded' journalism, that is, traveling with soldiers as they conduct operations, a prima facie threat to accuracy.

In this essay, I sketch a prima facie attractive African moral theory, grounded on a certain interpretation of the value of communal relationship, and bring out what it entails for how journalists should report on war and, to a lesser degree, how the military should treat journalists. My aims are to show how this Afro-communal ethic

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[1] My own contributions include Metz (2015a, b, 2018a). For criticism of certain African approaches to media ethics, see Fourie (2008); Banda (2009); and Tomaselli (2011). Although not a primary aim of this essay, below I respond to some of their major objections.

T. Metz (✉)
Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
e-mail: TH.METZ@UP.AC.ZA

can provide a unitary foundation for a wide array of plausible conclusions about reporting on military conflict, and, in particular, that it can avoid objectionable implications such as support for patriotic and embedded journalism.

Unlike other interpretations of the African tradition, which are founded on values of loyalty or participation or which focus on the subjectivity or positionality of knowledge, the conception of communion advanced here includes awareness of objective truth as an essential component. I argue that people cannot commune in the sense of genuinely share a way of life if they are misled or uninformed about the facts of how their society fundamentally operates. This understanding of communion grounds an ethical approach to wartime reporting that both has a sub-Saharan pedigree and is intuitively plausible, or so I argue in this chapter.

In the following section I advance a philosophical interpretation of African morality according to which a moral agent is at bottom obligated to treat people with respect in virtue of their capacity to relate communally. After spelling out what communion is and how to honour the capacity for it, I illustrate and motivate the moral principle by applying it to some general considerations about journalism, such as what its basic aims should be and when tricking sources is justified. Next, I address several key controversies about wartime reporting, under the headings of which information to report to the populace during war, how to acquire the information, and how to convey it. I conclude by highlighting respects in which the Afro-communal ethic has provided an attractive account of reporting on war and suggesting some topics for future reflection.

2   An African Moral Theory

Of the various philosophical interpretations of sub-Saharan moral thought (on which see Metz 2017a), I have argued that a fundamentally relational one is most defensible and should be of particular interest to a global audience (e.g., Metz 2012a, b). Instead of conceiving of morally right action in terms of what honours or promotes a good intrinsic to a person, such as her welfare, autonomy, or life, my favoured ethic places a certain way of relating between individuals at the ground of how to treat others.[2] The following comments from scholars of African ethics express such an approach:

> '(I)n African societies, immorality is the word or deed which undermines fellowship' (Kasenene 1998: 21).

> 'Social harmony is for us (Africans—ed.) the *summum bonum*—the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague' (Tutu 1999: 35).

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[2] Some of the following recounting of my approach to African morality borrows from previously published work, including Metz (2015a, 2018b). Other approaches to sub-Saharan morality focus more on the common good (e.g., Gyekye 2010) or life-force (Bujo 2005) as a basic value to be promoted.

'(O)ne should always live and behave in a way that maximises harmonious existence at present as well as in the future' (Murove 2007: 181).

I do not take these comments at face value, for they have counterintuitive implications regarding human rights. As they stand, they variously suggest that it is always wrong to undermine harmonious relationships or that one should promote them as much as possible. However, if it were always wrong to act in ways that are unharmonious, then coercion and deception would be categorically impermissible, even when directed against aggressors in order to protect innocent parties. And if one were supposed to maximize the relevant relationships, then it would be permissible to use any means whatsoever, including targeting innocents, whenever doing so would promote harmony in the long run.

To remedy these defects, while retaining a relational approach, I advance a principle according to which individuals have a dignity in virtue of their capacity for harmony or their communal nature that demands respect. After spelling out what is involved both in being able to relate harmoniously/communally and treating that capacity with respect, I show how the ethic plausibly grounds human rights and a plausible account of how one should relate to others depending on whether they are innocent or not.

By 'harmony' or 'communion' I mean the combination of two logically distinct relationships that are often implicit in African characterizations of how to live well.[3] Consider these quotations from an additional group of sub-Saharan philosophers, theologians, and related theorists:

'Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all' (Gbadegesin 1991: 65).

'Harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group' (Mokgoro 1998: 17).

'The fundamental meaning of community is the sharing of an overall way of life, inspired by the notion of the common good' (Gyekye 2004: 16).

'(T)he purpose of our life is community-service and community-belongingness' (Iroegbu 2005: 442).

In these and other sub-Saharan characterizations of how to harmonize or enter into community two relationships are repeatedly mentioned.[4] First, there is considering

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[3] In taking harmony/communion to be 'African', there is no essentializing afoot (*contra* Banda 2009; Tomaselli 2011). The claim is not that all and only Africans believe in a certain conception of harmony, or that one must believe in harmony to be an African, but rather that this conception, or at least ideas close to it, are *salient* in the African philosophical tradition in a way they tend not to be in others such as the Western, Islamic, Hindu, and so on.

[4] In addition, the following two ways of relating are characteristic of recurrent features of indigenous African societies such as seeking reconciliation, aiming for consensus, and labouring collectively. I lack the space to indicate the African credentials of the harmony-based ethic any further, but on that see, e.g., Metz (2017b).
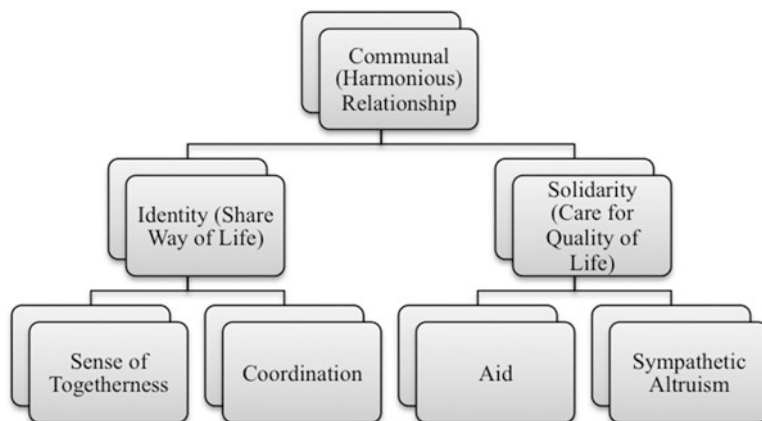
Fig. 1 Schematic representation of harmony. (This figure has appeared in Metz (2018b: 52))

oneself part of the whole, being close, sharing a way of life, and belonging, which I label 'identifying with' or 'sharing a way of life with' others. Second, there is achieving the good of all, being sympathetic, acting for the common good, and serving the community, labelled 'exhibiting solidarity with' or 'caring for' others. Identity and solidarity have comparable moral significance,[5] and when found together they are characteristic of intuitively attractive families, religious organizations, and workplaces.

For the purposes of this essay, it will be enough to work with a schematic representation of communion or harmony, as per Fig. 1:

By the Afro-communal ethic advanced here, it is not this *relationship* that has a basic moral value, but rather an individual's natural *capacity* for it. Typical human beings, for example, have a dignity insofar as they are in principle *able* both to be communed with and to commune. The highest moral status accrues to us, beings that by nature can be both *objects* of a harmonious relationship, viz., able to be identified with and cared for by others, and *subjects* of it, able to identify with and care for others. From this perspective, if you were barrelling down a street in your truck and had to choose between running over a cat and a normal, adult human being, the deep moral reason to strike the former is that it is much less able to relate with us in certain ways than the latter. Roughly, it cannot *love and be loved* to the same degree or in the same way.

Presenting these ideas in the form of a moral theory, one could say that an act is right insofar as it respects others in virtue of their natural capacity to relate harmoniously; otherwise, an act is wrong, and especially insofar as it values discordance,

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[5] It is therefore a mistake to suggest that this interpretation of African morality is not centred on considerations of welfare, as is suggested in Chasi (2016: 810).
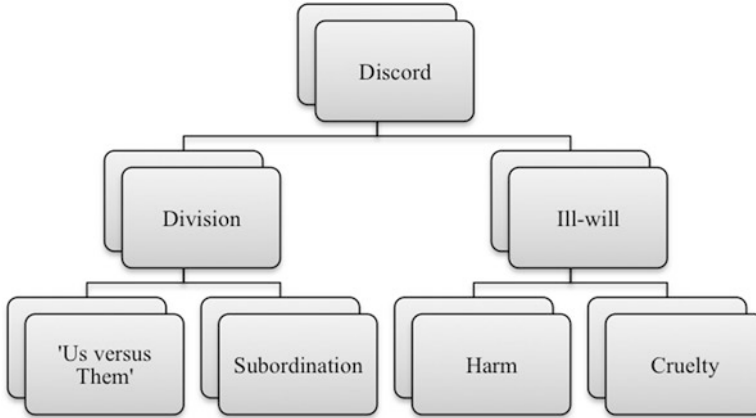
Fig. 2 Schematic representation of discord

roughly the subordinating and harmful opposite of harmony.[6] Or, an agent morally must honour those who can in principle be party to relationships of identity and solidarity, and she ought above all to avoid prizing relationships of division and ill-will.

Wrong acts by this ethic are those failing to treat people as special in virtue of their capacity for harmonious relationships. Indifference and isolation (in respect of innocents) therefore count as immoral, by this approach. Worse, however, are actions that express approval of the opposite relationships, which I call 'discord'. Instead of enjoying a sense of togetherness and coordinating with others, one identifies oneself in opposition to others and subordinates them, and rather than aiding others for their own sake and out of sympathy, one harms them consequent to malevolent attitudes, as per Fig. 2:

Note that my claim is *not* that discordant actions are always wrong; they are instead wrong when they express approval of discordance, which they need not do.[7] It is one thing to act in a discordant way towards someone who has not done so herself. If someone has not initially acted in a discordant (or indifferent) way, and has instead communed (with others who have merely communed), then she counts as 'innocent' and normally merits harmonious treatment (even if treating her discordantly would maximize harmony in the long run). If, however, someone has initially acted in a discordant manner,[8] and hence counts as 'guilty' or an 'aggressor', and if

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[6] It is true that, in our 'postmodern' condition, there are number of competing views of right and wrong and it is difficult to find a single principle that captures all moral considerations for every enquirer (on which see Fourie 2008). Nonetheless, some views are more philosophically plausible than others, and the search for a comprehensive principle has yet to be undertaken systematically in the light of non-western sources. I advance this interpretation of the African ethical tradition as one competitive theoretical approach.

[7] It is therefore a mistake to interpret this principle as neglecting the relevance and even aptness of violence, as is suggested in Chasi (2016: 802–803).

[8] Or threatens to, or has authorized others to do so, as per the usual qualifications.

the only way to get him to stop or make up for the harm done is to act in a compa-rably discordant manner, then doing so would not degrade his capacity for harmony. Instead, one's reacting discordantly, to the least degree necessary to protect inno-cents by stopping or compensating for another's initial discordance, is in fact to prize the capacity for harmony of both the aggressor and his victims (even if it somehow means less long-term harmony in the world).[9]

From this perspective, negative human rights violations roughly amount to severe instances of discordance directed towards innocent parties. What genocide, torture, slavery, rape, human trafficking, apartheid, and other gross infringements of civil liberties arguably have in common is that they are instances of substantial discord against those who have not acted this way themselves, thereby denigrating their special capacity to be harmonized with and to harmonize. Concretely, an agent who engages in such practices treats people who have themselves been harmonious with great discord: the actor treats others as separate and inferior, instead of enjoying a sense of togetherness; the actor undermines others' ends, as opposed to engaging in mutually supportive projects with them; the actor harms others for his sake or for an ideology, as opposed to aiding; and the actor evinces negative attitudes towards oth-ers' good, rather than acting out of a sympathetic reaction to it. This account of what makes human rights violations wrong plausibly rivals utilitarian and Kantian ratio-nales that are common in contemporary Western philosophy.

However, discordance can be justified, indeed morally required, insofar as it is essential to rebut another's initial, and hence wrongful, discordance. Respect for the capacity to exhibit communion and to be communed with means treating people according to the way they have exercised it. If people have misused their capacity to commune, and the only way to end their wrongful actions or to make up for them is to direct discord towards them, doing so is not disrespectful of them, and is rather respectful of them and of course their victims. This means, for example, that a state may, and must, subordinate and harm aggressors, both foreign and domestic, as necessary to protect those they threaten.

In sum, I advance what Anglo-American philosophers would call a 'deontologi-cal' interpretation of the African moral tradition, in contrast to a 'teleological' or 'consequentialist' one. Unlike the latter approach, the favoured principle does not instruct an agent to promote harmonious relationships as much as she can in the world. Instead, it prescribes treating other individuals with respect in virtue of the dignity they have inhering in their capacity to be party to harmonious relationships. Such respect usually means not treating innocent parties in extremely discordant ways, e.g., violating their human rights, even when that promote more harmony in the long run, and also treating aggressors in extremely discordant ways so as to protect innocents, even when that would fail to promote harmony in the long run.

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[9]The point parallels one familiar Kantian justification for coercion: although the capacity for autonomy is what confers dignity on us, an action that undermines autonomy, such as punishment, is not disrespectful when necessary to prevent an initial undermining of another's autonomy (e.g., Hill 2012: 310–312).

3   Implications for Journalism in General

Before discussing duties of the media regarding military conflict, I address the implications of the Afro-communal ethic for journalism more broadly. Specifically, I discuss which sort of information journalists should aim to disseminate, when they may be critical of public figures, and how they may legitimately acquire information from sources.[10] Addressing these issues will not only help to clarify the ethic of respect for people's ability to harmonize, but also set the stage for the discussion of wartime reporting in the following section.

Proper Content

Which sort of information should the media be disseminating, morally speaking? A private firm might aptly have the legal right to broadcast whatever kind of information is expected to bring it revenue (apart from what expresses hate speech, is likely to harm minors, etc.). Even if that were true, the question would remain of whether such a firm would have good reason to exercise its right in one way rather than another.

Presumably, media outlets morally ought to provide information of the sort that would be helpful to the public in some way. The African ethic articulated above grounds a plausible specification of what that would look like; for if what is special about people is their ability to relate communally, viz., to share and care, then the media have moral reason to provide information that would reasonably be expected to facilitate communal relationships. They could and should do so insofar as communion is possible between the media and residents, between residents themselves, as well as between residents and institutions such as the state.

Consider, first, information that would foster sharing a way of life in society. Coordination includes transparency about how people are interacting and affecting each other's interests. People cannot genuinely *share a way of life* in civil society and politics unless they are accurately informed about what is in fact happening[11] and how things could be otherwise. A so-called 'cohesion' in which people interact on the basis of some believing falsehoods about, or being ignorant of, how they are being treated is not an intuitively desirable one, and so is not the sort that is meant to ground an African moral theory. Hence, in order to foster a real identification between people in society, the media must help them by providing the truth about their fundamental relationships, policies, and institutions (news) as well as visions of how they could sensibly be different (opinion).

Second, think about information that would enable and encourage relationships that including caring for others' quality of life. Aid involves presenting media content that would be good for people in the sense of being objectively likely to improve their quality of life. That means meeting their biological, psychological, and social needs, including their need to realize themselves as moral-communal beings.

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[10] I first discussed these issues in Metz (2015a, 2018a).

[11] Not merely multiple perspectives about what is happening à la Chasi (2016).

Concretely, then, the media should (continue to) feature columns in which experts routinely share wisdom about relationships, provide insight into mental and bodily health, dispense advice about financial matters, and discuss consumer affairs.

One might object that sometimes more harmony would be produced in the long run by introducing or sustaining falsehoods. Perhaps broadcasting inaccurate views about a small minority would bring a large majority closer together. Relatedly, there is the point that sometimes discord is occasioned by the revelation of truths. For example, bringing to light ways that one group has mistreated another group might foster all the more conflict between them; there are occasions when falsehoods would prevent strife.

An initial response is to remind the reader of what is meant by 'harmony', 'communion', and the like; by definition it partially includes interaction that is not predicated on untrue beliefs. In providing an interpretation of the relational facets of the African moral-philosophical tradition, I have supposed that the relevant sort of cohesiveness is constituted in part by true beliefs rather than false ones.[12]

The critic could reasonably reply that the joint awareness of truth does not exhaust harmonious or communal relationship, even according to my own interpretation. Hence, sometimes the other elements of this relationship could best be promoted in the long run, if and only if truth were absent. This point is fair.

In response I note that, while the principle of respect for our communal nature does prescribe promoting communal relationships, it is not exhausted by that prescription. Respecting people's capacity to commune means not merely that one enables them to relate communally, but also, and in the first instance, that one relates communally with them. To honour a value means instantiating it, above all (on which see, e.g., McNaughton and Rawling 1992). So, one's aim as a moral agent should normally not be to promote harmony as much as one can in the world using a discordant means, in consequentialist fashion. Instead, deontologically respecting an individual as capable of being the object of harmony prescribes harmonizing with her (when innocent), and hence not being discordant by lying or taking advantage of the other's false beliefs, even if the long-term results would be better.

Critical Content

When is it permissible for the media to be unflattering of a person? Again, a private firm might have the legal right to embarrass, shame, or criticize anyone in ways that are not defamatory. However, the question is how it would be morally desirable for this right to be exercised. Making money for shareholders by increasing sales is one relevant factor for a firm, but it is not the only one, according to the Afro-communal ethic.

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[12] One might then suggest that my interpretation is not very African, given that in many indigenous sub-Saharan societies, the aim when responding to crime and other conflict has often been reconciliation, not an accurate awareness of what transpired. However, I submit that a better kind of reconciliation would be one in which the parties to it are indeed aware of how they had affected one another. That is part of what was compelling about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (even though it was admittedly lacking in other ways). For more on the claim that the right sort of reconciliation includes truth, see Metz (2015c, 2017c).

Specifically, considerations of respect for people in virtue of their capacity to commune or relate harmoniously entail that the media has good moral reason to broadcast damaging information or negative opinions about a person only insofar as she has misused her moral capacity and has acted wrongly. For those who have not misused their capacity to commune, an agent has strong reason not to exhibit division or ill-will towards them. That means refraining not merely from broadcasting falsehoods about them, but also from revealing truths, such as sexual orientation or appearance in a bathing costume, that would hurt them. To knowingly cause harm to an innocent party in order to make money is to treat her merely as a means, to trade off her capacity to be party to relationships of sharing and caring—indeed, to treat her in an uncaring, perhaps even vicious, way—for something worth less than that.

However, things are different with respect to people who have misused their capacity to commune, and have instead initiated discord towards other, innocent parties. With regard to wrongdoers, an agent may be comparably discordant towards them if, and to the extent that, doing so would be likely to protect his victims. That might involve stopping the wrongful behaviour, prompting the guilty party to improve his character, or facilitating compensation to victims of his immorality. This analysis provides a sensible explanation of why, say, satirical cartoons that target corrupt, negligent, and warmongering politicians, as well as greedy, manipulative, and domineering businesses, are entirely welcome (at least if the dishing out is distributed fairly).[13]

Obtaining Content

For a final application of the communal ethic to general issues of media ethics, consider the question of how a journalist may acquire information that she intends to share with the public, and, in particular, when trickery and other subordinating discord on her part is justified. When may a journalist, say, lie to a source, trespass, or take possession of property that someone else has stolen?

In general, discord to obtain information is justified only when the one targeted has acted wrongly, i.e., has flouted the communal values of identity and solidarity, and the discord is both essential and expected to obtain it. If there were strong evidence that someone is a wrongdoer or complicit in it, then deception would be justified as a necessary means by which to bring the wrongdoing to light and presumably to end it thereby. So, the communal ethic allows a reporter to withhold her purpose from, or even to lie about it to, a potential source, when engaging with one who has initially been divisive and acted on ill-will and when no other method would work.

However, when sources are innocent, it would normally be wrong for a reporter to be discordant towards them. Some ethical codes appear to permit deception or recording without consent when necessary for the sake of a 'clear public interest' (BBC n.d.: 51, 59, 72) or 'information vital to the public' (Society of Professional

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[13] This is a principled explanation of why it is appropriate to draw on the common indigenous African practice of holding monarchs accountable, invoked by Sesanti (2010) to show that respect for elders does not require subservience on the part of reporters.

Journalists n.d.), with a rider about the means not being disproportionate to the value of the story. A natural interpretation of these phrasings permits journalists to treat innocent individuals discordantly and merely as a means to an end. However, the Afro-communal principle would usually forbid that, since it would fail to honour sufficiently people who have not misused their capacity to relate harmoniously.

4   Implications for Reporting on War in Particular

In the rest of this chapter I invoke the communal ethic to provide guidance for major controversies about reporting on warfare. Specifically, I first address the issue of which information to report, and argue that respect for people's ability to harmonize, suitably understood, provides moral reason to reject patriotic journalism. Second, I take up the matter of how to acquire information, and make the case that respect for communion normally rules out embedded journalism, but can permit deception and other trickery as necessary to avoid unjustified censorship by the military. Third, I reflect on how to disseminate information about war, and maintain that what is sometimes called 'bystander' journalism, whereby reporters are dispassionate and avoid morally loaded language, is not always required, but that certain contemporary reporting techniques, such as 24-hour news and an emphasis on visual feeds, are often forbidden.

What to Report: Patriotic Journalism

As I noted in the introduction, a number of interpretations of an African ethic prescribing cohesion appear to permit and even require patriotic journalism, whereby a reporter supports her country and overlooks certain unwelcome facts about it, regardless of whether it was just to enter into war or is fighting the war in a just way. For example, in what appears to be the first theoretical exposition of an Afro-centric media ethic, Francis Kasoma says,

> The basis of morality in African society is the fulfilment of obligations to kins-people, both living and dead….Thus individual morals must conform to family morals and if the two conflict, the family morals are held paramount. Similarly, family morals must conform to clan, and clan to tribe morals. What strengthens the family, the clan and the tribe or ethnic group is generally morally good….This author submits that this ordering of morality in African society should be emulated by African journalists in the practice of their profession (Kasoma 1996: 107, 108).

Kasoma does not address war, and he is clear that he believes the media should hold politicians accountable (1996: 101). However, the logic of the above moral principle that Kasoma advances on the face of it prescribes patriotic journalism. If one's most basic duty is to do whatever will strengthen one's people, then a reporter is obligated to do what she expects would support her side's military cause, regardless of whether it is just or being fought in a just manner. That could mean not merely omissions, such as failing to report certain facts to the public, but also commissions,

falsifying claims so as to promote the war effort. Similarly partialist or parochial interpretations of African morality have been taken seriously by others (cf. Sogolo 1993: 120, 124–129) and at least one survey of African journalists indicates that about half of them claim to support patriotic journalism (Dube 2010: 29; see also Nyamnjoh 2005 for an influential analysis of clannishness on the part of African journalists).

My interpretation of the African ethical tradition entails the opposite conclusion, namely, that patriotic journalism is unjustified. For one thing, according to the Afro-communal ethic, it is not one's actual communal or harmonious relationships that at bottom matter morally, but rather every human person that does insofar as she is capable of so relating. The ethic's impartial dimension is not only more African, given that an ascription of dignity to all has been a salient feature of sub-Saharan moral thought (see, e.g., Wiredu 1996: 157–171; and Deng 2004), but also more philosophically plausible for forbidding one from treating strangers, roughly those with whom one has not communed, merely as a means to the ends of one's in-group, those with whom one has.

For another, recall that part of what it means to respect people's capacity to harmonize is to treat them according to the way they have exercised it. In particular, if some have misused their capacity to harmonize, e.g., by initiating discord against others, then one has moral reason to try to get them to stop, even if they are kins-people.

What this analysis means for reporting is that for a journalist to respect people's capacity to commune, she must report on others' egregious failures to have done so, such as initiating an unjust war, regardless of whether her own people (or its representative) is at fault. Revealing respects in which one's side has severely degraded others' capacity to relate harmoniously, by discordantly going to war, would be to honour that value, and failure to do so would add on to the degradation.

Similar remarks apply to a situation in which one's side has justly gone to war, but has failed to conduct the war in a consistently just manner. In such a situation a journalist should not report whatever the military tells her to, or avoid reporting on its wrongful deeds, so as to support the war effort. Just because one's people were done a major injustice and have gone to war justifiably to rebut it does not mean that any means whatsoever is thereby licensed. One's own side may normally exhibit division and ill-will (discord) only towards those responsible for the injustice, to no more than a comparable degree, and only to the degree necessary to prevent it. Hence, rather than comply with whatever the military says, reporters should investigate the conduct of war in order to ascertain whether, amongst other things, force used by either side has been targeted at innocents, or disproportionately severe, or unnecessary.

Furthermore, being a state institution, there is strong reason for the military to seek communion with the public for which it fights, and, since communion between parties includes knowledge of important facts about their relationship, reporters need to ensure transparency between the military and the public. The same point applies to the need for citizens to harmonize with each other; in order for them (or their representatives) to make joint decisions about the military, they need to be

informed, something most likely to be achieved by an independent enquiry such as that provided by a journalist.

What these reflections suggest is that the traditional tension between revealing truth about a war and prizing cohesion with one's associates dissolves, upon acceptance of the interpretation of African morality advance here. Communal relationship as a basic value that includes sharing a way of life consists (in part) of interaction between people consequent to an accurate awareness of what they have done and are doing. Hence, revealing truth is central to relating communally or harmoniously in the relevant sense; so-called 'cohesion' grounded on falsehood or ignorance is not a genuine sharing of a way of life and lacks moral significance, at least by comparison.

I close this criticism of patriotic journalism by noting the kernels of truth in Kasoma's and others' appeal to the ethical relevance of the interests of one's kin or other group. When it comes to the question of *who* has a reason to report on military wrongs done to a certain group, partial considerations answer it to some extent: a given reporter has some additional reason to help the group with which she has communed, e.g., by disseminating ways it has been wronged. Relatedly, with respect to the question of *why* one ought to report on military wrongs done to a certain group, *some* of the answer is plausibly: a given reporter ought to help that group *because they have communed* in the past. However, it does not follow from these considerations that it can be morally right, on grounds of communion or harmony as understood here, for a reporter to help her people carry out a wrongful plan, say, of initiating discord against strangers. Having associative reason to aid a nation fend off an unjust attack against it hardly means having reason to be complicit in its unjust attacks against others who matter morally for their own sake. The existence of partial duties to help one's in-group, which are indeed salient in African morality (e.g., Appiah 1998), does not mean there are no impartial duties forbidding harm to out-groups whose members have a dignity. That plausibly goes for not just reporters, but also soldiers.

How to Acquire Information: Censorship and Embedded Journalism

Most Constitutional democracies these days do not systematically censor in the way they did during World War Two (on which see Roth 2010: 479–497). However, sometimes they do enact a 'battle fog' policy, whereby overseas correspondents are blocked from covering combat zones during the initiation of a war (Mercer et al. 1987). In addition, military bodies still routinely demand to check that a given report will not divulge secrets to the enemy. Are these practices justified, and how should journalists respond to them? Other times, military agents do not want to shut out reporters, but conversely encourage the latter to embed themselves with soldiers as they fight. What does the Afro-communal ethic entail for this way of acquiring information during wartime?

To begin to answer these questions about the exclusion and inclusion of reporters, recall that in the previous section I argued that the sort of information that reporters have moral reason to disseminate to the public is what is likely to foster communion, e.g., between the media and citizens, between citizens and major

institutions, and between citizens themselves. That more or less means enabling people enjoy a sense of togetherness, to participate on a cooperative basis, to help one another, and to do out of sympathetic altruism. Implicit in this view of proper media content, however, is the view that it would be particularly wrong for the media to do the opposite, i.e., to broadcast what would likely foster division and ill-will between various actors. Roughly, it ought not provide the kind of information that is expected to enable or encourage subordination and harm.

Such a prescription rules out hate speech, by which I primarily mean expressions intended to incite violence, and it also forbids disseminating secrets about military defence the disclosure of which would *in fact* threaten national security. Although respect for people's capacity to commune prima facie means that the state should promote transparency about the military's operations, so as to facilitate a shared way of life between it and its residents, sometimes transparency could risk *great* harm to them, undermining the other, key communal value of caring for their quality of life. In these cases, since the media would be failing to pursue the end of harmony by doing something foreseen to substantially reduce people's well-being, the Afro-communal ethic would permit a state to forcibly prevent the media from publishing such material if they would not voluntarily refrain from doing so.

In short, some so-called 'self-censorship' by the media, as well as censorship by the state, are morally justified, when truly necessary to enable a country to defend itself (and with legitimate means) against unjust military attack that would undermine communal relationships in much more serious ways. Of course, it will be the tendency of states and their military wings to misapply the present principle, removing from the public eye more than is justified on the ground of communion. However, a party's inclination to misapply a principle does not mean that the principle is false or unjustified (and, in all but extreme scenarios, does not even mean that one should refrain from advocating the principle). Instead, the focus should be on what truly counts as national security and when disclosing information would be likely to threaten it.

To return to the questions posed at the start of this sub-section, in principle military censorship can be justified, not merely with regard to battle fog at the start of war, but throughout a military campaign. However, this is so only in cases where the media both have information that would really undermine national security *and* are likely to disseminate it. In many cases, the media will have information about military intentions and actions that would not undermine national security, while, in other cases, the media might have such information but not be inclined to broadcast it. Censorship would be unjustified in these situations.

In practice, therefore, the default position ought to be for the military and the media to negotiate about what should be published and what should not. Both should have the common aim of fostering communion, and therefore broadcasting the truth about what the military is doing, except in cases where the truth would undercut defensive combat and cause serious harm to the public or to soldiers fighting a just cause. In addition, both should acknowledge that they have competing interests and biases that will lead them to stray from efficiently carrying out this aim, with the military inclined to err on the side of victory and to have an overly

broad understanding of what counts as sensitive material, and with the media tempted to err on the side of getting the scoop. Usually, therefore, fostering communion would be best achieved on average over the long run by some kind of process in which both parties have input.

Now, where the military tries to censor information that would not be likely to threaten national security, it would be engaging in discord that is not expected to rebut a comparable discord, and so would be unjustified. Journalists would therefore be justified in using discord in response to this initial discord on the part of the military, e.g., by employing deception and other trickery to obtain the information and to get it disseminated.

Consider, now, not the problem of too much distance from military sources, but too much proximity. By this I have in mind journalists taking up the military's offer to embed themselves with troops during wartime. This controversial practice is directly entailed by one of the most salient claims in African media ethics, namely, that the distinction between reporters and sources should be softened, so that the latter become co-participants in the construction of stories (e.g., Blackenberg 1999; Christians 2004: 247–249; Shaw 2009: 505–507). The motivation for such an approach is clear, given the importance ascribed to cohesion—and even communion as understood in this essay. When engaging with innocent parties, there is always some moral reason to initiate, sustain, and deepen relationships of identity and solidarity. Applied to a journalistic context, that means a kind of activism, on the one hand, and a disposition towards cooperative news and opinion production, on the other.[14] However, those advocating participatory reporting, in which 'sources' are co-producers of the broadcasts, have not considered the implications of such a practice in a military context. Applied to wartime reporting, a demand for participation straightforwardly permits, if not requires, embedded journalism.

Although a principle of respect for people's capacity to commune probably does provide *some* reason for journalists to work closely with soldiers and to treat them as co-participants in reporting, it provides *greater* reason for them not to do so. Journalists who work closely with military personnel tend to identify with them, say, by seeing things in military rather than political terms and being inclined to adopt the language of 'we' and 'us' (Cockburn 2010; Ignatius 2010). This identification undermines the independence of journalists, their chances of accurate reporting, and, hence, their ability to foster a shared way of life between the military and citizens and between citizens themselves when making decisions about warfare, which, as above, prescribes an awareness of the objective facts.

Of course reporters should seek out the perspectives of soldiers, but that need not be done on such an intimate basis. And while there might not be realistic alternatives to embedding on some occasions, wartime reporters should strive to seek them out and to take advantage of them, when feasible. Otherwise, they are failing in their

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[14]African ethical ideas have similarly motivated participatory research agendas amongst academics and other researchers, on which see, for just two examples, Muwanga-Zake (2009); and Shizha (2009).

responsibility to enable citizens to make decisions consequent to knowledge of fundamental social realities.

How to Report: Bystander, 24-Hour and Visual Journalism

The last major cluster of wartime reporting topics I address are about what to do with the (morally relevant) information that a journalist has obtained (in a permissible manner). How should she and her editors convey it to the public?

One major debate about how to report concerns whether reporters should act as 'bystanders', i.e., in an emotionally dispassionate and morally neutral manner, or whether they should rather be 'attached' to the story or the people deemed to have been done an injustice (for the distinction see Tumber 1997; and Bell 1998). To be attached would typically amount to expressing sympathy for victims or those who have otherwise been harmed, as well as judging people with 'thick' ethical descriptions such as 'unjust', 'unjustified', 'murder', 'barbaric', 'cruel', etc.

With Clifford Christians (2004: 247–248), an influential media ethicist inspired by African and communitarian moral thought, I agree that reporting, on war or otherwise, can warrant attachment. As he puts it,

> Since our public life is knit together by communal energy, and we are morally obligated to one another by definition, moral literacy ought to be privileged in the media's mission…. Rather than merely providing readers and audiences with information, the aim of the press is morally literate citizens (Christians 2004: 248).

In the language of the Afro-communal ethic that I advance, honouring others in virtue of their capacity to relate harmoniously means, in part, seeking to harmonize with them, which includes exhibiting solidarity with them. The latter, in turn, is a matter of not merely making them better off, but also making them better people. And if the aim is to make better people, i.e., to foster human excellence or virtue, then journalists should use thick descriptions of people and actions in order 'to stimulate the moral imagination' (Christians 2004: 248), to return to Christians' eloquent terms.

In addition, supposing that some actions are *in fact* wrong and some character traits are *really* vicious, reporters can be morally judgemental without necessarily lacking either accuracy, objectivity, or even a kind of impartiality (in which the best arguments are considered for various positions). More strongly, if certain wartime behaviour *truly were* unjust or cruel in its essence, then the journalistic ideal of accuracy could not be reached without using moral descriptions of it.

Although expressing moral judgements appears justified in principle and need not count as mere propaganda, certain pitfalls should be acknowledged and avoided. Journalists and editors must guard against inclinations to dehumanize enemies and to replace detailed facts about wartime complexities with blanket condemnations. Tending to avoid thick moral descriptions might be useful for avoiding such moral hazards, serving as a desirable prophylactic against getting carried away. In addition, there is some risk that attached journalists could become targets during wartime, or at least have more difficulty being allowed into warzones and thereby getting at the truth. According to the communal principle, there is *some* moral

reason for a journalist to be attached, but it does not follow from this that there can never be greater reason in a particular context for being more of a bystander.

Additional controversies about how to report on war concern how often to provide information and in which mode. Should there be round-the-clock coverage of a war? Should video feeds form the bulk of what is broadcast?

Insofar as communion includes an accurate awareness of fundamental facts about social relationships, the answers to these questions are probably 'no'. The drive to provide 24-hour news about a military conflict would tend to encourage not only making claims that have not been adequately checked, but also focusing on trivialities (on which see Baker 2003; and Allan and Zelizer 2004: 10–12). Sometimes providing too much information impedes comprehension and hence harmony insofar as it is constituted by mutual understanding. Furthermore, a news source should probably not rely heavily on video clips during wartime, as they tend to entertain and even to inhibit thought, rather than to foster critical reflection on how people are interacting (Baker 2003; Zelizer 2004).

5   Conclusion

In this essay, I have articulated a moral theory with a sub-Saharan pedigree, according to which people's capacity to commune or harmonize must be honoured, and have applied it to several controversies about reporting, especially about war. While previous African ethical theorization has tended to support (intentionally or otherwise) dubious practices such as patriotic and embedded journalism, the ethic advanced here does not. One major factor that has enabled it to avoid such counterintuitive forms of reporting is its conception of how to relate, understood as the combination of caring for others and sharing a way of life with them, where such sharing is genuine only where there is objective knowledge of how parties have behaved. Insofar as sharing a way of life is predicated on an accurate awareness of basic social facts, journalists must report the truth even when it reflects badly on their own people or country and journalists usually should remain independent of military sources so as to be able to get at the truth.

I believe the ability of the Afro-communal ethic to ground a wide array of plausible judgements about the duties of journalists, editors, and military officials is some evidence in its favour. However, I have lacked the space in this chapter to weigh it up against other media ethical positions, such as those prominent in the western tradition. If I have succeeded here, then I have convinced the reader that it merits being compared with rival approaches in other work.[15]

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