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Solutions Journalism as a Tool to Erode Polarisation in the Media and Society

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ABSTRACT

In many African countries where people are brutally divided along ethnic, political and religious lines, a polarised media is likely to worsen the status quo. In this reflective essay, we explore what solutions journalism is and make a case for its application in journalism practice. We argue that the application of the six approaches to reporting on issues that polarise society has the potential to offer relevant solutions to societal problems, erode polarisation in the media and make journalism more relevant to society.

In African countries like Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Burundi, where people are brutally divided along ethnic, political and religious lines (Adebayo 2015), a polarised media will only worsen the status quo. In this essay, we explore what solutions journalism is. We argue that the application of the six approaches to reporting grounded in solutions journalism has the potential to offer relevant solutions to societal problems, erode polarisation in the media and society and make journalism more relevant to society.

Enshrined in the constitutions of most African democracies is media freedom and freedom of expression. In the same vein, most constitutions promise pluralistic media. So, in the spirit of democracy, journalists inform the public about issues that affect their democratic decision-making, such as public policies, political party policies and actions of public officials. They also expose abuse of power that impact citizenry; they keep track of policies and analyse manifestos of political parties for citizens to make informed decisions regarding elections. Media organisations also create room for citizenry to express their views on issues of public interest and give voice to diverse stakeholders such as political and social actors. In essence, the media serve as channel through which citizens engage or participate in democratic processes.

However, while doing this, the media have often been accused of deepening the social, economic and political divisions which society is confronted with, rather than helping to build consensus to solve societal problems. This has been attributed to several factors, such as the media being used as a space for political disputes; public media organisations only reporting on government achievements; and private media giving more space to opposition parties (Mail and Guardian 2014). When the media landscape is divided in

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this way, audiences are likely to engage in confirmation bias where people consume news that confirm their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs (Ling 2020).

This, by no means, makes the media live up to their mandate because it renders journalism utterly impotent (Ripley 2019). Can solutions journalism be a viable genre that could overturn this situation? We explore this concept and how its application can make the media become more relevant to society in subsequent paragraphs.

Solutions journalism does not have a standard definition; however, in a general sense, it is journalism practices with the view of linking issues reported on with possible solutions (Sabadan 2020). This genre of journalism not only throws a spotlight on societal problems but makes efforts to provide holistic and constructive content to media consumers in a manner that attempts to find solutions and to enhance knowledge and accountability (Tol Education 2020). It has been found that this approach to journalism makes media consumers feel less negative about news stories and encourages them to find solutions to societal problems. It also has the potential to mitigate the harmful effects of negative and conflict-based news (McIntyre 2019).

Advocates of solutions journalism lean on tactics used by rabbis, mediators and lawyers to get to the core of their subjects' positions and motivations to cover issues more thoughtfully, with the aim of revealing deeper truths and finding solutions. Ripley (2019) has developed six reporting tips that journalists can fall back on while reporting to realise this.

1. Amplify contradictions.
2. Widen the lens.
3. Ask questions and get people's motivation.
4. Listen more and better.
5. Expose people to other perspectives.
6. Carefully counter confirmation bias.

In the next section, we discuss exactly how journalists can apply these tips in polarised contexts in their practice.

The idea behind Amanda Ripley's six suggested tips is to feature nuanced and contradictory sides of issues or stories by not merely presenting both sides of a story but doing so through the technique of complicating narratives. This ensures that there is the inclusion of details that do not fit the narrative. Setting the tone for complexity reflects the reality of how individuals typically hold more than one view of an issue. Complexity destabilises the usual narrative that entrenches polarisation because it makes people become more reflective about issues rather than look at issues one-sidedly.

Journalists can complicate narratives by consciously augmenting contradictions and widening the lenses of stories that are covered. They can do this by asking questions that unearth people's motivations. Journalists must intentionally bring up contradictory details that do not fit people's typical narratives and ask their respondents to react to them. Questions that require the interviewee to reflect on the other side's position which may have some validity or one which seeks to get the interviewee's view on what is oversimplified about the issues help complicate the narrative.

Journalists must also widen the lens by linking narrow issues with wider societal problems and holding relevant actors accountable. By connecting the dots in this way, a broader conversation that seeks to find solutions to individual issues can be started. This will help do away with the inclination of simply presenting two sides of an issue and rather initiate the process of inquiry with the aim of looking for solutions. For example, a story about lack of water in a community can be expanded by giving attention to how the community has handled the water crisis; how the water crisis impacts their lives and livelihoods; what the government agency responsible for water is doing in other communities; why the agency has not given attention to the needs of the community; what they intend to do for the community and what the timelines are. By adopting this approach, it becomes an inquiry rather than a one-sided presentation of people lamenting their woes.

Besides, journalists must dedicate time to get to the core of people's motivations for whatever views they hold. This gets people to move away from rehashing their usual positions and begin to reflect on how they came by their positions. Journalists can ask questions to get answers to experiences that shaped people's views, what they understand about opposing views and what they want the other side to appreciate about their stance. Ripley believes that these deeper motivations are of more substance to any debate and will make room for a much more interesting and results-centred conversation to follow. Asking questions to dig up people's motivations makes people give attention to things they possibly have never given thought to. It can also uncover issues that nobody ever gave attention to for action to be taken to resolve them.

Journalists must also deliberately make interviewees feel heard through empathetic listening. They can do this by intentionally pausing to think about what the interviewee has said. They can also request interviewees to give more details about a viewpoint or incident. In addition, journalists must learn the art of "looping". Looping is done by picking on an issue an interviewee raises that the journalist believes is important to the interviewee and playing it back to them. The good thing about looping is that it provides an opportunity for the journalist to correct something the interviewee said that might have been misunderstood or misinterpreted by the journalist. Besides, the interviewee feels heard when this is done. The effect of feeling heard is that the interviewee opens up to the journalist and becomes receptive to other perspectives. This is a practicable way of realising solutions with news stories.

In order to counter various forms of biases, such as racial and ethnic biases, that partly account for polarisation in society, journalists must expose people to other people with different views. Journalists can do this by presenting information from other perspectives or using a wide variety of sources from divergent groupings. They can then make efforts to get answers to questions people have about those with opposing views. This helps broaden discussions and is a good way of doing away with confirmation bias, which is averse to finding solutions.

Journalism must offer solutions and not merely rehash problems. It must not entrench divisions or polarisation that exist in society. Amanda Ripley's carefully thought-through approaches to solutions journalism appear to be a viable approach to erode various forms of polarisation and help find real solutions to problems confronting society and are worth considering.

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