In the Shadow of the Global North

In the Shadow of the Global North unpacks the historical, cultural, and institutional forces that organize and circulate journalistic narratives in Africa to show that something complex is unfolding in the postcolonial context of global journalistic landscapes, especially the relationships between cosmopolitan and national journalistic fields. Departing from the typical discourse about journalistic depictions of Africa, j. Siguru Wahutu turns our focus to the underexplored journalistic representations created by African journalists reporting on African countries. In assessing news narratives and the social context within which journalists construct these narratives, Wahutu not only captures the marginalization of African narratives by African journalists but opens up an important conversation about what it means to be an African journalist, an African news organization, and African in the postcolony.

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In recent years, politics in societies across the world have been transformed by communication technologies that blur traditional definitions of news, the nature of citizenship, and the boundaries between public and private life. Many democracies face challenges due to disruptive communication processes operating in the context of declining levels of trust in public institutions, including legacy journalism. One result of these trends is the spread of disinformation by illiberal movements and parties that aim to undermine science, the press, civil society organizations, and other traditional public information sources. A related trend involves the growth of authoritarian regimes that rely on media systems and communication strategies to manage publics.

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In the Shadow of the Global North

Journalism in Postcolonial Africa

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New York University

CAMBRIDGE
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To Captain Wahutu, whose memory has kept this little light of mine shining, and to those who risk their lives and safety and keep us informed

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Preface

Growing up in the island city of Mombasa, the last thing I ever imagined myself doing was writing a book and living in the United States. The latter changed in the fall of 2007, when my journey to writing this book began. Working on my senior thesis three years later, I remember the sense of hopelessness at the realization that not only was there little work done on how African journalists represented conflict in Africa but also that many scholars were quick to discuss how journalism in Africa could be improved while hardly ever talking about what African journalists *actually* did. After a series of fortuitous meetings, I would later apply to graduate school for one reason and one reason only: to work on a project that sought to understand how African journalists engaged in constructing knowledge about genocide and mass atrocities in my home continent. I was annoyed by how scholars talked about journalism in my home continent and by the fact that they hardly seemed to want to talk to African journalists. African journalists seemed to be there only to be spoken *for* and *about* but not *with*. There was a lot on how journalism in Africa was flawed and could be improved, but there seemed to be very little on what journalism in Africa was doing. It appeared that African journalists could only be thought of as an absence, a negative presence, to be filled and found by journalism scholars in the Global North. This meant that African journalists were always being talked about as needing to be "trained" to mimic the norms of their Global North counterparts. This was even more so in the realm of "African representation" by international media, where the "representation" was assumed to be done by the Global North and "international" meant anywhere but Africa.

This is what motivated me to work on a project that centered on African voices and experiences and paid short shrift to those from the Global North. I remember the perplexed looks from audiences when they realized I would not be talking about *The New York Times* or *The Guardian* and would instead solely focus on news organizations such as *The New Times* of Rwanda and *The Daily Nation* of Kenya. Several were even more shocked that when talking about these organizations, the discussion was not about "improving" them or "capacity building" but rather a genuine curiosity about what they were doing. How were they constructing knowledge about Africa to Africans? To borrow from Adom Getachew's (2019) excellent book, how were these organizations engaged in worldmaking? The number of times I have had to justify why and how this book was sociological – despite being anchored in knowledge production and Weberian concerns – to sociologists or why (as many media scholars insisted) I was not studying news organizations in the Global North is a reminder of why works like *In the Shadow* are crucial.

While these questions and challenges justify my decision to pursue this project as I did, I want to clarify how and why precisely *In the Shadow* is a sociological project anchored on a Weberian sociology of the press approach. Sociology of knowledge, as used here, allows *In the Shadow* to pay attention to journalists' knowledge repertoires. It contextualizes journalists' taken-for-granted knowledge while leveraging Pierre Bourdieu's field theory to show how this knowledge aligns with, or is divergent from, perceptions of journalism heavily steeped in assumptions and norms informed by colonial logic (Rodny-Gumede, 2021). This is premised on understanding colonization – and its attendant tentacles – as an enduring environing field (Steinmetz, 2016; Go, 2008, 2013a; Bourdieu, 1958; Hammoudi, 2009).

In the first year of my graduate education, I began collecting newspaper articles on Darfur from four countries: Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Nigeria and Egypt. After a few months, I realized that getting articles from Egypt and Nigeria in any systematic way would be nearly impossible, so those stories did not show up in the dissertation. By the end of that semester and the start of my spring semester, I realized I would have to interview journalists whose work I was analyzing. It was clear that if I wanted to understand the news production process, I would have to talk to journalists, at the very least. Moreover, if my whole shtick had been that scholars were marginalizing African journalists by not talking to them, I could not afford not to include interviews as part of my methodology.

The data from these two methods were crucial in providing nuance to the macrolevel findings from the content analysis, but most importantly, they provided different types of information. These interviews pointed not just to a politics of identity unfolding across the stories I was analyzing but also gave voice to their frustration about something I had noticed in my content analysis: the significant role played by wire agencies (Chapter 4).

An earlier plan to conduct a newsroom ethnography suddenly fell apart (Chapter 3). Still, this implosion led to what (I think) was even better data on how journalism students were being prepared to enter the field. So, I spent several months at a journalism school in Kenya, attending classes and talking to the various students about why they wanted to be journalists and what they thought about the field they were about to enter. It was during this period that the first moments of disjuncture became clear; while, on the one hand, students were getting ready to join an African field, on the other hand, they also held fields in the Global North as examples of what good journalism was. They thought they needed to conform to those external standards to do "good journalism." There seemed to be little appreciation that these fields may have only been exemplary in their localized context, such as *The New York Times* being good in a US context, and as such may have been doing a terrible job in Kenya.

The primary challenge would be how to put journalism organizations in different countries within the same universe. I remember conversations with many respected scholars who told me that comparing organizations from multiple African countries was impossible since they were radically different from each other. The prevailing sentiment always seemed to be that one could compare organizations in the Global North to each other but not those in African countries. I almost started believing this narrative until a fortuitous conversation with Dr. Teresa Gowan at the University of Minnesota's sociology department provided the solution. Dr. Gowan suggested taking a look at field theory as a possible avenue through which to think about my project.

My entry into field theory was through Rodney Benson's (1999) "Field theory in comparative context," which allowed me to analyze organizations and journalists from multiple countries with varied histories as existing in the same universe – a universe that had the scars of colonization, continued interventions from foreign countries, and struggling to form a cogent identity locally, regionally, and internationally. Yet just field theory would not be enough because when the focus was Africa, there was a need to engage with postcolonial theory, which, as a

relational theory itself, I saw as having a natural affinity with field the-
ory. Both theories are interested in excavating relationships of power
that may be invisible to an outsider while also allowing for a universe
to be created in which organizations are in contestation over the right
and power to narrate particular experiences. For field theory, this contes-
tation is based on different species of capital. In postcolonial theory, this
contestation is one over the appropriate registers to deploy when thinking,
talking, and writing about the postcolony. Moreover, both theories are con-
cerned not just with the process of constructing reality by actors (such as
journalists) but also with how this construction relies on particular taken-
for-granted assumptions. Using both theories allowed me to capture the
tension between *habitus* and *doxa* in the selection of sources (Chapter 5)
and how journalists think about and articulate their roles (Chapter 4).

As I navigated the process of transforming this manuscript from dis-
sertation to book, one thing that has become clear is the role of col-
onization as a "macroenvironment" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).
Colonization has affected not only how journalism fields approach their
construction of reality but also whom they think of as worthy part-
ners in this construction process. This process made clear that African
journalism is different. Not poorer or of less quality, but different. It
is different because it comes to be at a different moment in time in the
world and because it had to negotiate not just its identity in relation to
the state, but it also had to negotiate newly formed national identities.
But it is also similar to other types of journalism in its pursuit of con-
structing reality, its attempt to align itself with global (often Western)
normative approaches to the profession, and its relationships with other
fields of cultural production nestled in a field of power. As such, African
journalism can be studied similarly to journalism in the Global North
while also paying attention to the continual influence of colonization,
even as we approach seven decades since Ghanaian independence. *In
the Shadow* offers new insights into how exactly these differences and
similarities can be articulated. It captures the complicated nature and
history of journalism on the continent and points to how journalists are
engaged in a discourse of identity and belonging. Moreover, it provides
scholars of African journalism with tools to better account for nuances
and particularities of African journalism while showing them how to
treat journalism fields on the continent as worthy of study rather than as
shells that need their capacity to be built.

Finally, a word on my use of postcolonial theory. Some may argue that
this project should have used decolonial rather than postcolonial theory.

To this, I say I am not trained in decolonial theory and approaches. As such, a project like *In the Shadow* is more about proposing a theoretical approach that would allow those not immersed in decolonial epistemologies to study and think about journalism on the continent in a manner that pays heed both to the colonial influence on the profession and the role of continuing a colonial logic in affecting how the field operates. *In the Shadow*'s approach is one that insists on scholars appreciating who "generates knowledge" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015, p. 492) and where this knowledge is from. In the case of field theory, I point to the role of Algeria and Algerians (Chapter 1). Regarding norms and metajournalistic discourse in Africa, I point to the role of colonial logics (cf. Chapters 1–3).

Thus, my use of postcolonial and field theories pays attention to the fact that colonization, and all its attendant tentacles, acts as a "macroenvironment" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) with several proximate and distant fields embedded in networks of fields. Specifically, my use of postcolonial theory relies on Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2015) discussion on the points of conversion and diversion between postcolonial and decolonial theory. As such, *In the Shadow* is working concomitantly with those steeped in decolonization by focusing on what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, p. 491) sees as a "dismantling [of] meta-narratives" while leaving open the fact that decolonization takes up the other side of this task by pushing forward "questions in the quest to understand the unfolding and operations of the modern Euro-North American-centric modernity." I firmly believe that there is space and need for both of these to happen and that the continent's experiential diversity allows for theoretical diversity.

More importantly, I cannot claim to be a decolonial scholar. As a field that has been around for decades now (even though many treat it as the newest shiny thing), it is imperative to be careful about any claims one may make about decolonizing anything if one has not been trained in the appropriate methods and epistemologies. Subsequently, it would be inappropriate for any scholar to loosely claim to be decolonizing journalism if they are not trained in the appropriate techniques. Any such attempt would be intellectually dishonest. This is even more so considering that my *doxa* was formed in institutions located in a settler colony, and (at the time of writing) I am located in an institution that is still grappling with how to expressly and openly acknowledge the violence meted against the Lenape peoples of *Lenapehoking*.

Acknowledgments

One evening in the fall of 2002, my father sat me in a hotel room in Nairobi. I had been suspended from school weeks before the national university entrance exam, and my mum had refused to take me back to school. She had done so on prior occasions and finally put her foot down, saying it was time my father took me back. My dad was scheduled to travel to Europe on a work-related trip, which he postponed to take me back. This is why we were sitting in a hotel room that evening in 2002. My dad looked at me and asked me to *read* instead of *study*. He said the time for *studying* would come, but this was not it. All he wanted from me was a grade that would get me into university. He didn't want me to be an A student and asked me to give him at least something he could work with. Two decades after that fateful night, it strikes me that this book is the fruit of a decade of *studying*. My one regret is that my father is not here to share this moment with me.

As much as I dislike it when people talk about "African sayings" when trying to sound sagacious, allow me to paraphrase one that captures my writing experience. Writing this book took a village – a village whose boundaries are transnational in scope and multidisciplinary in tradition. Nonetheless, I will try my best to capture its members. I have to thank Joachim Savelsberg and David Pellow for their guidance, mentorship, and patience. In the classic good-cop–bad-cop tradition, they nudged and cajoled me into constantly pushing myself during long, cold Minnesota winters. To Joachim, who has consistently made me a better human being and scholar; welcomed me to his home on numerous occasions for dinner and deadline reminders; was always ready with an apt sociological observation whenever I found myself floundering and/

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