Медиация внутренних кризисов в Африке: новая рефлексия

Mediation of intra-African crises: new reflection

Research article / Научная статья

Images on journalism and the power of media to turn the page in the history of crises: a Malian case

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Abstract. A few images on journalism and its actors in the Sahel, and specifically Mali, that are shaped by the media itself, are presented. These images, identified in articles that capitalize on the challenges of political, social, and cultural crisis, as well as the risks that a journalist takes when reporting and writing on the realities and events he observes in Sahel, are supposed to shape the power of the media to bring change at an epistemological level in the society it unpacks and depicts. This epistemological metamorphosis is seen as a turning of a page in the history of crises and the proposal herein is to see what type of change this turning refers to, re-launching critical perspectives on the new powers or non-powers of journalists and journalism to inform, create and maintain a critical resistance meant to leave a relevant sign in the history, through deconstruction and management of crises communication, that would finally assure the durable control of crises, exercised by an informed and empowered society with the scope to overcome crises at a pragmatic and epistemic level. The analysis is qualitative and intends to invite the reader to more reflection on the interdependencies between the reality, the journalistic reality, and the journalist's power or non-power to coin the two. Crises whose management from the point of view of public awareness and truth knowledge is compromised by a second-level crisis affecting the journalists, the leaders of the civil society, and broadly the media, who have concomitant powers and non-powers to change the perception of the public on the first level crises to such a point that, in the holistic interpretation of the term, this management of crisis through deflection should be considered a new page turned in the history of crises.

Keywords: media reality, radio journalists, freedom of speech, conflict zones, vulnerability of journalists, deontology

Представления о журналистике и силе медиа: перевернуть страницу в истории кризисов: пример Мали

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Аннотация. Представлен ряд образов журналистики и ее действующих лиц в Сахеле, в частности в Мали, которые формируются самими медиа. Данные образы, выявленные в статьях с акцентом на проблемах политического, социального и культурного кризиса, а также на рисках, которым подвергается журналист, освещая реалии Сахеля, должны формировать силу СМИ, призваны внести изменения на эпистемологическом уровне в общество. Представленный качественный анализ данных приглашает читателя к масштабному размышлению о взаимозависимости реальности, медиатизированной реальности и власти. Управление первичными кризисами в реальной жизни на основе правдивой информации оказывается скомпрометировано кризисом второго – медийного – уровня, который затрагивает журналистов, СМИ и лидеров гражданского общества. Журналисты и медиа не уполномочены изменять своей интерпретацией восприятие обществом реальных кризисов. Эта страница в истории кризисов должна быть перевернута.

Ключевые слова: медиареальность, радиожурналисты, свобода слова, зоны конфликта, уязвимость журналистов, деонтология

Introduction

In our times, talking about crises constitutes, by itself, a crisis for the main communication. When discovering a crisis, naming it, divulgating it, or shedding light on it, the crisis ceases to be named as a simple event limited to creating an issue, feeding it, and keeping it alive (Heath, Palenchar, 2009). From the point of view of who is talking about a situation, or the subject of communication as the transmitter (in our context – the journalist) whose objective is to shape the information about realities with the most neutral attitude toward them, an event whose treatment as crisis determines the challenging of the communication act itself, is an event that might produce relevant changes in the acknowledgment on the potentialities of the crises resume and overcome. Through a critical analysis of articles in the online media, this paper aims to unpack the perspectives on the media implications over the change of perceptions on the crisis in Mali, related to terrorism, war, and sometimes military junta's actions, resulted as a consequence of threats to journalism and freedom of expression or the right to access the information of journalists, activists, influencers and audiences.

The narrative of crisis in the Sahel

Why is the depiction of the crisis by itself a crisis in the Sahel? In its report *What It's Like to Be a Journalist in the Sahel*, the organization *Reporters without Frontiers* has shown the numerous curtailment situations to which journalists in the Sahel are exposed, providing them with very few, up-to-zero, opportunities to exercise their profession in safety and freedom of speech. The report, as concluded on the website, talks about the challenges of death, abduction, limited reporting spaces, expulsion, mercenary actions related to information, and editorial pressure the journalists in the Sahel are facing day by day.

Considering that journalists in the Sahel themselves are concerned with situations that express crises, as real challenges – in the form of terrorist attacks, warfare, political crises, social movements, pandemics, and even financial crises with consequent severe secessions – the way challenges are lived influence the way the information about them is exposed to the audience. It is for this motivation that the crises to which the act of communication on crises is exposed, determine a change of perspective on the realities the information refers to, whose outcome could be the reshaping of said realities, the minimization of upheaval, or even sneering (at least as a perception from certain audiences). All these because, as Sadibou Marong, Director of RSF's Sub-Saharan Africa bureau in Dakar declared in the RSF report, the African continent would be "deprived of independent journalists and reliable reporting, a region where self-censorship is becoming the norm"[1]. When self-censorship is in effect, the responsibility of the transmitter on the content of the message is reduced so visibly that the receiver can recognize this, leading to the transmitter or the information becoming not reliable anymore. A second issue to take into account is the summons of extremism that diffuses in certain parts of the Sahel, especially in Northern Mali, due to which the messages that shape the reality could be already servicing other communication interests than the representation of realities about the rights of the audience to be correctly informed, and not manipulated.

According to an article from Aljazeera (20 January 2021) until 2010 the press freedom situation in the region was considered "fairly good". The changes came when attacks on the press were justified by the need of terrorists to control the public discourse, which showed once again the critical importance of journalism on facts of peace, stability, and politics, especially when considering the outcomes of fresh thinking, several time regime resistant thinking on public concerns, of the audiences engaged in volunteer spectatorship (Allan, 2013, p. 31). In this case, the vulnerability of journalists could have led to the distortion of the realities to such a point that the main crisis that society as a whole would have been put in front of, had diminished by the liberator discourse of those interested in gaining power from attacks, conflicts or coup d'état. Following this, the main crises would have been shifted towards being a press crisis, a critical resistance opportunity limitation, and a severe challenge to the freedom of expression (which includes the freedom to access information).

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[1] What it's like to be a journalist in the Sahel. (2023, April 3). *Related Platforms.* Retrieved December 19, 2023, from https://reliefweb.int/report/chad/what-it-be-journalist-sahel

The same article in Aljazeera brings testimonies of journalists in the North of the country who were conducted to abandon the northern parts of Mali and move to the southern ones (Bamako), due to security risks, which is not the case for those protected by the UN peacekeepers, through programs like Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The question is – how other journalists, not integrated into the program, do report? And, although a journalist would take the courage to report from the northern parts of Mali, the journals are recommended not to send them in the dangerous parts where conflicts are in effect. Moreover, what would happen without the protection assured by MINUSMA, which is already gradually withdrawing from the Malian conflict areas?

Attaining to the above concerns and actions of the military junta to recommend journals not to send journalists in the conflict areas, by itself a double-folded border problem of limitation and protection, the distinction between military and civilian journalists would be clear in the case of Mali. It also highlights the limited possibilities of a journalist to exercise his/her profession in areas of conflict, therefore, the narrow access of audiences to manifest their spectatorship and develop new perspectives on the real challenges. The restrictions of access to conflict areas for reporting, access being given to only military journalists (which might already service, many times un-intentionally, the regime's interests) , combined with the growth of internet use in Mali – a report of March 2020 showing that 64% of the population of Mali was using the internet, as single users (Vermeersch et al., 2020) – led to the deepening and streamline of radicalization mechanisms, which affect populations, their perceptions on events, and lastly, the capacity of journalists not being on the field, to use and manipulate the scarce sources they have, sometimes ending to reproduce incomplete images of the truth, intentionally or not.

The challenge of access to information and the ways perceptions on it fluctuate based on the value of the truth of reduced or, several times, unilateral reports from conflict zones, could be better understood under the form of a precept enclosed in the Touareg proverb: "*If God closes one of your eyes, He will open your other one*" which could be interpreted, from the media in conflict area's point of view, as the possibility to see, at last, although several difficulties are hindering it. But seeing with one eye only could be different from seeing with both, and that is why, the reporting on such crises, in the case of Sahel, and specifically Mali, represents a crisis of the press itself, and holistically, the act of communication, due to waves of critical resistance and interference it could be subject to, mostly without the knowledge and malevolence of the journalist, but due to the systematic oppression of the freedom of speech and the consequent right to be correctly informed. It is, therefore, to reflect on the education of journalists and the measures to ensure the journalist's capability to exercise the profession following deontological norms and the morals, culture, collective memory, and reasoning of society. Following Allan's previous proposition on the role of spectatorship (2016), education on crisis communication and crisis decoding is also important at the level of the whole society. It is provocative in this sense, the report from 2020[2] on

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[2] Vermeersch, E., Coleman, J., Demuynck, M., & Dal Santo E. (2021, April 29). The role of social media in Mali and its relation to violent extremism: A youth perspective, ICCT, March

the actions of radical groups on social media, meant to recruit young people, case related to which, the results of the interview show a 66% of respondents concerned on the fact that youth in Mali would not have sufficient educational tools to counteract such challenges.

To reduce the possibility that younger or older journalists should feel pressed to distort realities, as a consequence of their radicalization or fear, the many organizations that operate in the sector of media safety, strive to assure the journalists the needed educational tools to overcome the challenges to misinformation. However, their action in Mali, under the group *Maison de la Presse*, seemed to be yet insufficient to overcome the situation of continuous risk predictions, fear, abandonment, or even misinformation caused by death, extortion or menaces with violence on the journalists. Moreover, the arrests that some journalists were the object of, highlighted that the opposition to any campsite may be a sign of risk taken by the journalist, so no real information is guaranteed outside the postulation of the journalist's professionalism.

But a more relevant crisis of media in Mali is represented by a high number of arrests and detention of journalists having commented on politicians or their acts, or made other so-called declarations that were "likely to disturb the public order in the social media". These arrests are opposed by organizations defending the rights of journalists to the freedom of expression and with responsibility towards the audience, like in the case of The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) which condemned the arrests and trial of journalists like Abdoul Niang, Sidiki Kouyaté and Tahirou Bah. The concerns for the position of Malian authorities regarding the exercise of the journalist profession are central to the actions of the MFWA whose declared intention is to be solidary with the journalists in Mali, those arrested, kidnapped, or even dead following events of November 2023[3] and all journalists facing threats that could limit their capabilities to exercise their profession. But all this support may not ignore the biggest concern to find the tools for ensuring the safety, integrity, and freedom of media, to preserve the right of the end consumer to non-manipulated information.

Anticipated by images of crises about challenges the journalists encounter in Mali, circulating in the public sphere, the present reflection aims to go beyond the right of the person to receive information, as present in Art. 9 from the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the art. 19 from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It sheds light on the concept of a journalist's power, or non-power, to assure access and give shape to information on a crisis when that crisis itself changes and affects the journalist. A perspective on the power and non-power of journalists, and broadly the media, could give some replies about the management of the crisis in society, through communication on it and the roles of the actors, in this case, the media, as a transmitter, and the society as a receiver, to contribute to the deconstruction of the crisis, as method to overcome it.

2020. *WATHI.* Retrieved March 10, 2023, from https://www.wathi.org/the-role-of-social-media-in-mali-and-its-relation-to-violent-extremism-a-youth-perspective-icct-march-2020/

[3] Mali: Journalist remanded in custody for making false statements against the judiciary. (2023, November 9). *MFWA.* Retrieved December 10, 2023, from https://www.mfwa.org/country-highlights/mali-journalist-remanded-in-custody-for-making-false-statements-against-the-judiciary/

The first power the journalists have, despite the challenges to their safety and consequent self-censorship induced by the fear caused by the several threats journalists find in front of themselves while reporting in the Sahel and specifically in Mali, is their permanent epistemic connection with the audiences through feelings (Fuller, 2010): fear, anger, sadness, hindrance.

But before feelings, the question is put in the repository of standpoints towards a conflict in progress, observed and reported by the journalists, conflict which is the object of major debate in the society and reflected in the media. In the case of Mali, these standpoints are fluid and converge to the freedom of expression, as a major objective to be defended by the Media Foundation for West Africa. The freedom of expression would justify acts of critical resistance, and opposition to it, from a series of actors that are opposing each other, including the state authorities (in this case totalitarian and military) whose system of punishment and opposition to critical resistance would not be entirely justified, as standpoints do resonate in general lines, at least at a narrative level, hence opposition would make no sense. It is the case of the activist Adama Diarra who has organized demonstrations against the presence of French troops in Mali and the MINUSMA, but has also campaigned for major cooperation with Russia, all of which should have brought him sympathy, and not opposition from the junta, at least from the pro-Russian faction, not to speak about the presupposed cultural expressions of decolonization ideals of the Malian people protesting against the European presence and neo-colonialism, that junta in its whole should integrate. Notwithstanding this, Diarra was convicted, such as a social media influencer and activist Rokia Doumbia, who complained on a TikTok about the security risks and high prices in Mali. She pointed out that the mission of the coup d'état to bring welfare had failed, and precisely in the context of the warfare estate that the junta is forced to govern, the sentencing of this action reflects the intentions of the military power to reduce any voice that could put them in alarm, as they assess that the provocative activist would have abused and insulted the Head of State".

Contribution to the non-power of media and crisis theory

Although according to Hachten (2005) autocratic regimes can't control and censor the news as in the past, the situation in Mali seems to be the same and it is deepened by challenges to self-censorship with foundations on feelings, the connection between journalist and audience and the fluctuation of standpoints that depicts the world of communication in Mali as a no man's land, where nobody is safe unless he/she keeps quiet. On the other hand, the support of the Media Foundation for West Africa given to journalists and activists might be interpreted as additional critical resistance to regimes that are less empowered to limit the circulation of information with traditional methods, and by using violent methods (even unjust prosecution) they turn one crisis into a bigger one and risk to see information coming out anyway (Hachten, 2005, p. 24), despite their efforts to hide it.

When autocratic regimes are also military, the situation is more sophisticated, as the authorities avoid validating the role of reporting journalists as dispassionate observers (Allan, 2013, p. 178), so recommending the retirement from the conflict zone (through notifications sent to journals to withdraw journalists in northern Mali), while benefitting from a certain heresy created by journalists

around the threats to the exercise of this profession, represented not only by terrorist attacks but also by the authority's interest to reduce the level of information of the public on certain facts affecting the safety and development of the country, turns the "outcomes of crisis" into a "crisis of outcomes" from a media point of view, at least. That is to say, the event to which at the beginning the concentration is given will be deconstructed or dissolved in the fact of negotiations between the limits of access to information of the transmitter and the limits of diffusion or access to the same information of the receiver.

This negotiation is allowed by the already theorized powers of the media and the audience, powers that are growing in times of crisis and war, and bring forth, according to Hanusch, the mechanism of disaster reporting, that could lead to compassion fatigue (2010, p. 163) and the stereotyping of danger. That being said, authorities in Mali found probably a clean terrain for demanding UN peacekeepers to leave Malian territories, according to the Committee to Protect Journalist's report from December 2023, resulting in a worsening of violence on journalists, caused by an unknown enemy, who does not always attack the journalist for his work, but also for extortion. The justification of the authority's demand for UN peacekeepers is based on the enthusiasm of the Malian people for the continuation of the decolonization process, considering the manifestations against the presence of France, or the criticism of ECOWAS's[4] interpreted ongoing dependency on French values, since member states, as postcolonial states, still serve the agendas of colonizers (Benyera, 2020, p. 27).

Following the observation of Mortensen (2015) that boundaries between media users and media producers are blurring, the journalist who finds himself in the situation of being threatened, induced to self-censorship, limited to eye-witness in the situations of conflict, whether for objective or subjective restrictions imposed on him, might find it difficult not to deliver contents that represent already manipulated, journalistic realities. This contravenes the education of journalists who should be trained for impartial documenting (Allan, 2013, p. 1), but since eye-witnessing is already partial, since it is relative and subjective, the reporting without being a direct observer, but only based on data received from sources that transcend the certainty of their truth-value, is practiced and represents the Achilles heel of journalism.

Furthermore, the non-power of the media is illustrated in the paradigm of journalism "grassrootsing". The report of the Committee to Protect Journalists informed in December 2023 that "Aziz Djibrilla, a presenter with Radio Naata, a community station in Labbezanga on the Mali-Niger border, was killed; Harouna Attino, a news presenter on the Ansongo-based community radio Alafiya, was wounded; and Assaleh Ag Joudou, director of Ansongo-based Radio Coton, and Moustapha Koné, a host at Radio Coton, were kidnapped"[5].

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[4] ECOWAS – Economic Community of West African States. The ECOWAS region, which spans an area of 5.2 million square kilometres. The Member States are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from https://www.ecowas.int/about-ecowas/

[5] In Mali, 1 journalist killed, 1 injured, 2 kidnapped by unidentified gunmen. (2023, December 5). *Committee to Protect Journalists*. Retrieved December 30, 2023, from https://cpj.org/2023/12/in-mali-1-journalist-killed-1-injured-2-kidnapped-by-unidentified-gunmen/

So local radio stations are playing a fundamental role in shaping a civil society in Mali, as also Schultz observed (2012, p. 20), making it more evident that the journalist becomes a leader in an Odyssey of threads to the main exercise of its profession, from explanations of their colleagues from Radio Coton and Radio Naata about the fact that they were supposed to participate in a training for the identification of false information. The fact that newspapers are considered to be less effective than radio (Schultz, 2012, p. 58) would be reconfirmed, in case the mentioned attacks were seen not as simple terrorist attacks, but as attacks architected by the parties being interested in the work and symbolic position of the three journalists, or as counter-actions to the freedom and power they express as media producers and subjects.

In either case, the signals given by an attack on producers of media who are more effective being radio journalists, and reach broader audiences, including the non-educated ones, are conclusive of shaping a crisis that develops at an epistemological level, as well. Despite the critical arguments against African relativism, it is worthwhile considering here two cultural aspects that might be useful in understanding the development of journalism or media crises in Mali, from an initial socio-political crisis to a crisis acting at an epistemological level. Both are capitalized by Hamminga (2016, p. 101) in the concept of the major importance given by the African to the "heard", rather than "seen" or "read" information, and in the image of the African perception of time from the collocation: "*The future is hypothetical, unreal and uninteresting to consider now*" (Hamminga, 2016, p. 72). So to speak, attacks on radio journalists could signify an immediate act of violence over the society whose cultural boundaries are well known, through which, in the end, the victims may seem to accede to the roles of leaders and models, precisely because there is no forecasting of their future non-power to report and exercise their profession freely or at all, but only the projection of their past, as heroes.

Conclusions and reflections

Pointing to the concern to protect journalists who report from conflict zones, and to claim cases in which journalists from printed media and audio-visual, as well as other broad media representatives (such as activists and influencers), are sentenced unjustly for having freely expressed their opinions, the branch organizations have the power to define these heroes, in light of their non-powers to act. Thus, the branch organizations contribute to hindering some of the challenges of new media that were studied by Fuller (2010), capitalizing on the book of Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2001), which, for the case of crisis metamorphosis in Mali picks up the form of sentences to further reflect upon: a) the interrupted cycle of news could produce the perception on the value, completeness and hardly obtained journalism, so that information is nor confusing, nor annoying; b) sources could not gain more power over the journalists if more protection should be guaranteed for the access to information and to diffusion; c) the debate over conflicts, interests, freedoms to witness and report, or the freedom of expression, in a paradigm of fear-deontology and passion for journalism, are still gatekeepers for journalism in Mali, risking to put aside the context and transform the perception of audiences on it; d) the reporting is not overwhelming, on the contrary, it is challenged by incompleteness; e) the focus on special cases, the image of the leader or the hero does not help blockbuster mentality to take over, as in the cases

of deaths, injuries, convictions of journalists, the heroes and their stories are only signifiers for an overall message on the crises they treat or manage as communicators, like a replication of the crisis itself, but from a different angle, of a direct victim. In this, the idea could be to recall the attention on the emotional ties between the audience and the journalist making them equal in a communication chain, on a first level of interpretation. But on a second level of interpretation, audiences are dependent on their heroes or leaders in an epistemic critical resistance that finds no basis in the need to accede the correct information, but that one which is suitable to the narratives of the heroes and leaders of communication. This is how positive misinformation might find grounds to produce and maintain the crises of outcomes, from a situation of crises whose management required the correct and efficient communication, but without mentioning who decided the definition of the correct and efficient communication.

Investigating journalism during authoritarian regimes, or conflict contexts, and also taking as example the specific case of Mali, where fear, self-censorship, anticolonial and decolonization features of mentality might jeopardize the completeness and fairly good contribution of journalism to the civil society's critical resistance – whose existence is still feared to be inconsistent – any conclusion on the juxtapositions of power on fragilities, strengths on weaknesses, and reality on journalistic reality would necessarily comprise the contextualization of powers and non-powers the journalists have over their audiences, and how these audiences might perceive crisis in the light of not only being informed of, but also living the experience, sharing the emotion and the standpoint on it with the journalist, through contextualized and also offline navigable storytelling (Pavlik, 2001).

But the outcome of this would be that crises whose management from the point of view of public awareness and truth knowledge is compromised by a second-level crisis affecting the journalists, the leaders of the civil society, and broadly the media, who have concomitant powers and non-powers to change the perception of the public on the first level crises to such a point that, in the holistic interpretation of the term, this management of crisis through deflection should be considered a new page turned in the history of crises. Hence, this would be supported, not actually by an original method to cope with any type of crisis, but by the central role of symbols and representations in the relations between the state, as the locus of recognition and public security assumptions, and the individual, mediated by self-scrutinizing and self-exposing journalism at a practical and epistemological level.

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