

## ***Text and Context in Information Production***

by Ludovic Miyouna\*

### ***Abstract***

This paper examines the contexts in which the journalism practices his profession in the Congo, and makes some observations of general interest. Arguing that journalistic texts are not produced in a vacuum, the author discusses the various contexts which influence the journalist's discourse. He further examines the consequences of such influences on the journalist's work, and the perspectives that emerge from the analysis. He notes that political context limits the creativity of local journalists, and calls for the relaxing of censorship so that journalists may do their work more creatively.

### ***Résumé***

Cet article analyse les contextes dans lesquels le journaliste pratique sa profession au Congo et fait des observations d'intérêt général. Partant du principe que les textes journalistiques ne sont pas produits dans le vide, l'auteur présente les divers contextes qui influencent le discours du journaliste. Il passe en revue les conséquences de ces influences sur le travail du journaliste et les perspectives qui ressortent de l'analyse. Il note que le contexte politique limite la créativité des journalistes locaux et lance un appel pour la levée de la censure pour que les journalistes puissent exercer leur métier de manière plus créatrice.

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On the basis of observations of the experiences in Congo, it has been noted that with regard to journalism, the *texts* produced by persons working in the field of information are a direct result of the intellectual and psychological conditioning of the authors.

As the need for direct information grows in the modern world, so too have several African countries continued to limit the efficiency and creativity of journalists. The intellectual and psychological conditioning are what we call the *context*, which has a direct influence on the message.

There are three major contexts:

1. the context of the cultural environment and of the methodological practice;
2. the socio-economic context;
3. the political context.

It would seem quite difficult to speak about text and context in information production, making an introduction of the timeliness and the legitimacy of the information in our society. And yet it is superfluous to worry about the timeliness and the legitimacy of information in the specific framework of the Congolese society. The production of information, in effect, is a result of the constant need which characterises each individual and each society: the need to communicate.

The need to communicate, as the MacBRIDE report emphasises, "bears witness to the aspiration towards an enriched life through cooperation with others". From this point of view, information is seen as a content-stimulation, which is intended to favour changes in behaviour on the basis of the enrichment brought about and according to the scientifically established principle of stimulus and response.

The complexity of the world today (a complexity which has been increased by all the phenomena of industrialisation, the development of technologies, the importance of economic factors, political conflicts, military confrontations, the development of the discussion of issues in the framework of international relations), has contributed considerably to the need for information both for the individual and for the international community. Already, political, economic and technological supremacy are determined by the possession of the maximum of information, insofar as information guides decision-making and affects the selection or formulation of strategies.

The need for information has developed such that it has rendered obsolete some traditional channels for the transfer of information, mostly the individual ones, and has given way to what we now like to call "mass communications". Data banks, telematics, and computers whose use is becoming more and more widespread throughout the world, are children born in this context of an increased demand for data processing which is gradually leading towards the individualisation of their services.



The prestige of the citizen of the 20th century is more and more dependent on his or her capability to listen to the world. An under-informed person is a person living at the outer edge of the world, away from the irresistible dynamic of the transfer of knowledge. In any given country, the person who receives news through the newspapers, radio or television, necessarily feels more involved and is therefore more predisposed to better chances of participation in community life, a community whose emotions and reactions as well as whose basic culture he or she shares. As a member of the group, the person is generally speaking in solidarity with the other members, even if specific aspects may differ at any given time.

From this point of view, one could generally say that information plays the social role of integrating the public into the various groups of which it is made up, ensuring a minimum of consensus whenever there are divergencies, thus leading to the unity of the groups. At that point in time, the "global village" envisaged by MacLUHAN will certainly be justified. This means that in reality the need for information in the Congolese society could not be emphasised in a specific way except in relation to those fundamental objectives, such as the development objective, (which, by the way, is common to all the countries of Black Africa) as well as the objective of social integration, in a country in which the numerous cultural and ethnic sub-groups initially seem to go against the minimum critical level of uniformity at the current stage of development.

If a great deal has been said over the past few years on the disruptions of the traditional social milieu of the African by the development of modern means of communication, it is precisely by taking these two requirements into account; the two requirements which indeed are only one. This argument stems from the fact that the ability of these methods to transit far-away and diversified experiences reduces the exclusive influence of the individual-receivers' closest environment while at the same time the desire for the transmitted experiences increase. Audio-visual techniques accomplish one thing in this regard, something can be summarised in one phrase: they transmit a maximum of informational content in the minimum of time, and to a maximum number of persons belonging to a heterogenous group. In the first instance, the notion itself of mass information is brought about by the coming together of all these qualities. This model of traditional exchanges is characterized by a relatively slow development of the dissemination and reception structures. This is a phenomenon which is all the more significant in Black Africa because the problems related to the state of under-development (insufficiency of transportation infrastructures, isolation in terms of space, etc.) and the narrow-mindedness which often operates within traditional spheres, are a hinderance to the dynamics of exchanges. It was already evident that the production of information, and in particular by the media, could become an instrument to combat intellectual isolation, for bringing together varied experiences and hence for the better speeding up of behavioural changes in order to encourage the fulfillment of the individual and thus encourage development.



Therefore it is pointless to wonder about the legitimacy and the timeliness of information in the Congolese society, because its legitimacy proceeds from the people, its timeliness is dictated not only by the inviolable need for communication, but also by the fundamental objective of fulfillment and human progress.

But information is not an abstract notion. It is produced through a text and in a particular context. In other words, the text of the journalist is a reflection of the context to which he belongs, in terms of geographical, cultural, socio-economic and political parameters; the political context often being the most dominant, insofar as it determines attitudes towards work.

For this reason, we as trainers owe it to ourselves to know the context in which our future journalists will be called upon to work and exercise their profession, so that we can challenge them with the kinds of influences with which they will be confronted most often in the preparation of their texts.

For this reason also, the reflection on this matter has been based on the dynamic which, in essence, is the core of the debate between both the producers and the receivers of messages: "How is the acceptability of a text arrived at, in the Congolese context which is made controversial by so many ambivalences, and this in relation to what kind of obstacles?"

A gradual analysis will be made of the different contexts which influence the journalist's discourse, their consequences, and finally the perspectives that appear possible to perceive.

The term TEXT is meant to imply the whole set of sound, visual or scripto-visual element-signs which are organised in the discourse, and CONTEXT means the parameters which determine the situation of the producer.

The use of modern means of communication such as radio, telebroadcasting or newspapers has made us accustomed to the kinds of discourse which emanates from a very small producing minority and are directed towards a multi-faceted mass. Whereas the information transmitted by these means is critically appraised by the existing groups (here we are referring to government groups and/or one or several political groups), the information is on the contrary a basis for rejection or resistance manifested by either of the groups.

The text is accepted because it is pleasing. And it does this on the basis of the following considerations:

- the quality of presentation (quality of the form);
- the quality of the content (quality as opposed to an appreciation of the substance);
- recognition of its timeliness (implicit in this is the recognition of necessity).

But the text is also accepted because of the degree of its accessibility. A text, can in effect, be isolated and hence be very difficult to transmit as a message. It can be isolated, for example, because of the level of specialisation of the language used. Its inaccessibility can also be due to the linguistic code used and this therefore raises the problem of the inadequacy of reference points.

The text can also be accepted because of the level of its respect or submission

to the dominant political text; in other words, fitting into the authorised format which in general is the least original. In this manner then, the factors pertaining to coercion are dictated directly or indirectly by the contexts, which in turn influence the message. Hence from this, we can retain the three main principles.

1. the context of the cultural environment and of the political methodology;
2. the socio-economic context;
3. the political context.

### ***A. The text and the context of the Cultural Environment and the Practical Methodology***

The journalist who produces the text produces it generally by virtue of his own informational objectives, apart from his level of technological qualification, in other words, his professional know-how, as well as by virtue of a minimum of expectations from the "powers that be", which have latent or fully expressed needs. So, we come to the definition of the *quality of the text*, as opposed to the usual professionalistic and cultural curtains the journalist hides behind, something which is purely cultural in the audience. It will be noticed that the journalist is conditioned by technical requirements, and that he does create by virtue of a perceptive basic environment, and of his own intellectual environment.

The Information and Television Exchange Centre (1) which has carried out research in this area, has identified nine quality dimensions, to which are attached the indicator items pertaining to the importance given by the audience to the broadcasts. These nine criteria are also to be found quite often in the surveys carried out of listeners of their information channels. The criteria are as follows:

The Information and Television Exchange Centre (a cultural and technical co-operation agency — headquartered in Paris)

1. *Subject matter*

*reference item:*

"A broadcast whose subject matter interests you".

2. *Interpretation of events*

*reference item:*

"A broadcast which enables you to better understand the world in which we live".

3. *Living culture*

*item:*

"A broadcast which enables you to update your knowledge".

4. *Traditional cultures*

*'Item':*

An enriching broadcast.

5. *Entertainment value*

*"Item:*

An enjoyable broadcast.



6. *Accessibility*

*Item:*

A single broadcast which is accessible to all.

7. *Originality of the subject*

*Item:*

A broadcast whose subject is a little out of the ordinary.

8. *Originality of form*

*Item:*

A broadcast which is produced in an original manner.

9. *Production quality*

*Item:*

A perfectly-produced broadcast.

With regard to information production, four particular dimensions are to be noted:

- The subject matter;
- interpretation of events;
- the living cultures;
- accessibility.

*Subject matter*

*item:*

"A broadcast whose subject matter interests you".

It is quite obvious that the articulation that exists between the text produced by the journalist and the interest the target audience attaches to it is an important point in the evaluation of information. It is a significant and decisive factor when it comes to the preferences of the audience.

This aspect in fact helps us to find out whether the subject matter of the broadcast can engage the receiver or group of receivers, insofar as it responds or not to the concerns and preoccupations of the target audience. The level of engagement is therefore a relevant factor in motivating the receivers of the message who more or less always amplify the message given the considerations of their environment, or otherwise they ignore the message due to a lack of interest.

So, commenting on the news about torrential rains which might destroy the crops in Mindouli region would appear to have greater significance for a Mindouli farmer, than news about an earthquake disaster which occurs in Ouagadougou. Similarly, news bulletins would seem to be of greater importance to the ordinary office employee living far in the Mossendjo area, than would be information about a Non-Aligned summit conference taking place in Brazzaville.

These are some of the particularities which determine the micro-contexts in which the journalist lives and works. The other aspect was that of:

*the Interpretation of events*

*item:*

A broadcast which enables you to better understand the world in which we live.

Of course it is ambitious to believe that the journalist's commentary on an event can lead to an understanding of the world in which we live, all the more so by virtue of the fact that in interpreting alone, the journalist involves himself in the discussion; he builds up the "intelligibility" of his text using cultural, psycho-sociological and scientific components which constitute his prism of perception which, together with his sensitivity he uses to try simply to communicate with us.

One can at least hope that with explicit explanations as a basic operational technique, information would be translated in a manner which would make it more significant and encourage the discerning qualities of those who are expecting to learn something, *something new*.

Explicit explanation therefore depends on the operation of unravelling understanding from words and inaccessible realities, while avoiding the strait-jacket situation of totalitarian and mythical discourses, and while proposing a series of hypotheses through which a situation can become understandable. The receiver of the message has therefore to make his choice, using his own considerations. Hence, the intervention of the Soviet army in Afghanistan would not be presented as a new offensive "by the Soviet revisionists in their struggle for world hegemony". This is terminology which is at one and the same time esoteric and hollow, and does not contain the relevant elements of a critical explanation. The shortcoming of this phrase is that it is formulated in a very affective manner and it suggests the existence of an established opinion. Because the intervention of the Soviet army in Afghanistan could be presented in a totally different way, for example, as *a political situation of international interest and which would certainly rekindle the passionate opinions held about the East-West conflict and about the balance of power between the blocks.....*

This latter is a different type of presentation, which is less suggestive and confines itself simply to outlining the possibilities taking into account their dynamic relationships. This attitude in interpretation requires the minimum of objectivity in the producer of the text, even if the possibility of objectivity in a journalist remains the object of scepticism.

If, to quote Bernard VOYENNE, it is true that "each event, however minor, brings out a meaning in social relationships which, are themselves never neutral", one would then be tempted to admit that the use of some supplementary techniques — such as sufficiently significant photos, a series of varied interviews with witnesses, on-site reporting — can effectively and objectively assist in the understanding of events.



In relation to the third dimension:

*Living culture*

*item:*

A broadcast which enables you to up-date your knowledge;

the same argument can be pursued, because here the understanding of the term "living culture" also depends on the presentation of facts in the various fields of human activity.

As for:

*Accessibility*

*Item:*

A broadcast which is accessible to all;

experience has already shown that it is pointless to expect a broadcast programme which is accessible to everyone. The accessibility dream is a technocratic dream which destroys technical efficiency and ignores the various forms of rejection with which it is confronted.

The linguistic code, the level or formulation of the text and the specialisation of the information, as already mentioned above, become at one and the same time factors which limit accessibility and they come into play most often in the mechanisms of repetitive exclusions which have been observed in the process of channelling information to the potential receivers.

From these various points which have been raised, it appears that the context of the cultural environment and the methodological practice essentially have an influence over the level of the formulation mode, characterised by a relative lack of explicit explanation, which in turn considerably limits the qualitative range of the informational content.

On the contrary, the analysis of the text in relation to the socio-economic context would instead make it possible for influences to transpire at the thematic level and when it comes to determining the reference points for identification.

## ***B. The Socio-Economic Text and Context***

Although in the western societies, the so-called land of plenty, the needs of the liberal economy and of competition have encouraged the development of publicity based on a certain number of ideals which correspond to the dream of material prosperity and of individual well-being, the socio-economic context of black Africa in general and of the Congo in particular, has encouraged the birth of a type of discourse which is also mythical and accepted as such by our journalists: the discourse on Development.

The rationale for development, in the minds of the people and also in the minds of politicians, has become a reason for legitimising material on "progress", a reason which is passed on and supported by our information professionals. This is all the more surprising as a process since there are many Africanists (economists and political experts) who agree to recognise the need



to introduce a new content to the notion of development and of progress; more surprising also since traditionally, European economists have had the tendency to provide definitions on the basis of Western models.

It would appear that this latter definition remains the more dominant, although it has a sprinkling of "progressist" vocabulary which does not question the new slogans amplified by the journalistic materials. These are mainly the slogans which pertain to "the new international economic order", to the "deterioration of terms of exchange and trade", to "the transfer of technology", "inflation", without even questioning oneself about the origin or the meaning of inflation in Congo, an explanation which might lead to one wondering about the ideological stand point of our country! It would be appropriate to mention here that the kind of journalistic material we have been accustomed to in Congo often utilises notions and ideas which are full of meaning, which should call for questioning, but which restrict themselves to clichés in terms of and space time, without the readers ever getting to know when the deciphering would be done!

The Congolese journalist is too often restricted to or drawn towards mythical content, and our thirst for knowledge is frustrated by the inability to understand. Would the analysis of the political content of the informational production allow for a better understanding?

### ***C. The Political Text and Context***

The political context, which is very influential, is probably the one which lends itself most to controversy and causes great problems in the definition of the journalist and of the status of the informational text. Because, basically, the various scientific theories on the notion of information tend to converge towards the recognition of its worth using the degree of probability. The less a thing is probable, the more it characterises information. Clearly, originality is an essential factor in the definition of information, because *originality* contrasts with *ordinariness*. In this regard, originality rejects evidence, because evidence is ordinary and does not encourage reaction. It brings in nothing new in relation to previous knowledge of the receiver hence in relation to the receiver's behaviour.

If appraised in this manner, this scientific quality implies - for the transmitter of information, i.e. the journalist - a certain number of requirements that pertain to it, particularly *intellectual autonomy* and *lucidity*, so as to encourage the journalist to have a better ability for discernment. There would also be in particular greater *independence of judgement* in the explicit explanation or commentary; and finally, the use of a *maximum effort for objectivity* as a basis for reflection and work.

One can speculate for a long time on the objectivity of the journalist for, as B. Voyenne says: "the practice of objectivity is hard and paradoxical, because the facts that one aims at establishing are in the final analysis creations of the mind, requiring the intelligent intervention of the searcher and, consequently,



his personal co-efficient. Inevitably, the journalist projects himself into the situation he is describing, even if this is manifest only by his mere presence and more so, by the break which he introduces into the continuity of the real and by the formulation he adopts."

We believe at least that the effort for objectivity requires that the journalist uses his skills and should not be an unconditional proxy, but a constant researcher. For this he can obtain assistance from a given number of techniques and professional uses, such as studies, interviews based on the concern for balance, round tables, formulation of plausible hypotheses, criticism of witness accounts, utilisation of diverse sources of information, the choice of meaningful photographic illustrations, etc. in his search for objectivity.

The observation of the daily experiences in our country has shown adequately that the Congolese journalist, as he has been created by the context, can no longer define himself beyond the reflexive reaction of defence and self preservation which bring about in him the attitude of self-censorship and constant susceptibility.

In fact, journalists at the Voice of the Congolese Revolution, the National Congolese Television, the Mweti newspaper and to some extent of the "Africa Week" (mention is not made of Etumba because it is a newspaper which is intentionally militant), all these tools of information, live under the strain of political constraints which control them to such an extent that for them it is quite common to receive telephone calls during which they are told off. For information to be disseminated, it has to be subject to the stamp of censorship; as an example, the head of the programme production at the Voice of the Congolese Revolution is also the person responsible for censorship. The chronological organisation of television news has necessarily to be subject to a strict order related to the political interest of the national news in question. The failure to reproduce *complete* speeches made by eminent political personalities is often interpreted as a refusal to submit to the dominant material, and so sanctions can be applied.

The attitudes which we have just described show how difficult it is for a journalist to do his job while supposedly respecting some rules and techniques, something which in fact is professional and should conform to a professional communication strategy. The result is that often there is a regression in professional motivation, so that the journalist eventually no longer has the full abilities for action which would enable him to function under the concern for efficiency in communication, for the respect of the state and its leading authorities.

Under these circumstances, the journalist withdraws into a position which is more reassuring and ends up reproducing uncritically the sacred speech which then becomes the scientific reference for the production of material. The consequence is that the journalist tends no longer to write up his own material; he simply copies for fear of an explosion of wrath!

The dispatches which find their way into the newspapers are the objects



of a great deal of uncertainty. Because one wants to limit the risks run, one remains as faithful to the dispatch as possible, therefore it remains quite dry. In the absence of an official position with regard to a given political situation, no journalist would dare propose a hypothesis and the resultant information remains pale, without commentary and in the telegraphic style of the dispatch. Here also, there is an absence of explicit explanation.... so much so that we are gradually moving towards the information of total reproduction, and since the reference point to this is the dominant ideological material, propaganda comes gradually in an irreversible manner often reaching the threshold of saturation beyond which no message can pass. So you turn the knob and you get radio Zaire: for music! Not that we are against the propagandist type of journalist, but in these circumstances it would be advisable to have intelligent propagandists who are also communication strategists. But when material depends on a saturating level of redundancy, the information is poured into a situation of platitudes and becomes void. Those who receive the message commit themselves to resisting the material produced, and the material which was initially intended to be propagandist, hence bearer of messages, is faced with a rejection by the audience which is no longer prepared to listen. The audience is therefore prone to turn to short wave: Voice of America, Radio RSA, Radio France International, Radio Germany, etc. And this is the real danger.

For those of us who aspire towards a minimum of cultural autonomy, the rejection can give way to an excessive consumption of foreign broadcasts, leading to a strong prevalence of extroverted personalities, with all the consequences such a situation entails.

As it happens, the political context of journalistic practice is a factor which limits the creativity of local journalists, whereas the liberation of the creativity of our journalists would seem to be a measure of independence, however relative that might be. In fact, it is only adequately important local production which can remedy, albeit partially, the current invasion of our socio-cultural space by the international radio, television and newspaper programmes, which on the whole are dominated mostly by the Western world.

The creativity of local journalists is a measure of independence, and it is therefore necessary to preserve and encourage it. It would seem imperative that the current censorship constraints be considerably relaxed because they weigh heavily on the profession of journalism. Historically, it is true to say that political stability has often gone hand in hand with invariability. The multiplicity of opinions seems to have become a threat to the economy and the political "one-upmanship" has become organised into a kind of repression of differences. Even in the more experienced political circles, when invariability has contributed to maintaining the status quo, it has always been a sign of a society in decline. When on the contrary it was as a result of wars and conquests through some play in the social dynamics, it was the sign of progress towards consensus. The search for multiplicity of opinions is a democratic experience, and a break with this search constitutes a detrimental stop to democracy, something which

expresses itself by the extreme centralisation of information, thus reducing its richness and diversity, limiting its scope, because it is only one group expressing itself, controlling, moulding and disseminating the message.

Information production must be liberated; but of course this must be done while guarding against imitating the types of Western freedoms which have already led to the excesses we know — such as anarchy — and many other marginal materials which make us aware of how much we are formulating our information in the framework of definite development objectives, something which contributes fully to our fulfillment and to the intellectual development of our society.

At the end of this presentation, it clearly appears that the field of journalistic practice in Congo might not quite be appropriate for the production of original material, in respect of the inalienable right which is universally recognised for all, and that it would be necessary to encourage conditions for production which take into account the necessity for the government authorities to formulate central objectives with the regard to communication at the present stage of our economic, social and cultural development, as well as objectives which also take into account the need for explicit explanations as required by qualitative information, via the process of exhaustive or thorough deciphering, involving journalistic technicalities; objectives which, finally, take into account the collective needs and expectations of the public authorities, and the potential receivers.

It would also seem that it is imperative that the State protects the journalist, within a legal framework which guarantees his rights and duties, so that he is no longer ridiculed and subjected to obsequious kowtowing, but be an intellectual worker who is legitimately carrying out his duties.

Finally, for those of us who are responsible for the university and professional training of our students, it must be said that it is time to advocate the coming of journalistic teaching, which is based on the observation of the long experience press personnel have acquired, in order that the journalist of tomorrow may live, and he has to be a truly liberated journalist.