

WHO TELLS THE STORY

Media, Power, and the Shaping of the World We Think We Know

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This book has a twin-chapter architecture. Every numbered chapter has an A version (global media history) and a B version (Nigerian press history). They can be read sequentially — 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B — or as two parallel books, all A chapters then all B chapters. Both readings work. The argument holds either way.

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A PARALLEL HISTORY

The story of media and power, told in two columns: global events on the left, Nigerian press history on the right.

Rows highlighted in amber mark the years where both columns speak to the same moment.

GLOBAL MEDIA EVENTS		NIGERIAN PRESS HISTORY
1859	Charles Darwin publishes <i>On the Origin of Species</i>	Henry Townsend publishes <i>Iwe Irohin</i> — West Africa's first newspaper — from a mission press in Abeokuta
1863		Robert Campbell founds <i>Anglo-African</i> , Lagos's first independent newspaper
1880	The <i>New York World</i> is purchased by Joseph Pulitzer; sensationalist mass-market journalism begins its American rise	
1891		John Payne Jackson's <i>Lagos Weekly Record</i> challenges colonial land policy — journalism as political resistance
1895	The Lumière brothers screen the first projected film, Paris	
1898	The USS Maine explosion; Hearst's <i>New York Journal</i> declares war before an investigation. The Spanish-American War follows.	
1900		West African journalism establishes itself as the primary vehicle of nationalist thought across Lagos, Accra, and Freetown
1915	Britain's Wellington House war propaganda bureau enlists H.G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle to manage the Allied narrative of WWI	
1920	The first commercial radio broadcast airs in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	
1928	Edward Bernays publishes <i>Propaganda</i> — the founding text of modern public relations	
1929	Bernays stages the <i>Torches of Freedom</i> march for American Tobacco; women smoking rebranded as liberation	
1937		Nnamdi Azikiwe founds the <i>West African Pilot</i> in Lagos — 'Show the light and the people will find the way'
1945	The BBC World Service begins broadcasting globally in multiple languages	
1947		The Nigerian press intensifies its campaign for independence; Azikiwe elected to the Legislative Council
1953	Tobacco executives meet at the Plaza Hotel to manufacture scientific doubt about smoking and cancer	

1954	CIA and United Fruit Company: Bernays's propaganda operation helps overthrow Guatemala's democratic government	
1960	Kennedy vs. Nixon — the first televised presidential debate transforms politics into a visual performance	Nigeria gains independence on October 1st. The nationalist press that built the movement now faces the question of what it becomes next.
1963		Herbert Macaulay's Lagos Daily News tradition is inherited by a new generation of Nigerian journalists navigating post-independence politics
1964	The Daisy Girl ad airs once on NBC and reshapes American political advertising	
1966		First military coup, January 15th. PM Balewa killed. The press comes under military pressure for the first time since independence.
1967		Biafra declares independence, May 30th. The Nigerian civil war begins. Two media campaigns — Markpress in Geneva, federal government control of NBC — fight for the international story.
1968	Life magazine and Paris Match publish starvation photographs from Biafra — the birth of the modern humanitarian media spectacle	Wole Soyinka is detained. The press in federal Nigeria is under direct state management. The Biafran story reaches the world through Geneva.
1970		The war ends, January 15th. Between one and three million dead. 'No victor, no vanquished.' The full reckoning is deferred.
1971	Daniel Ellsberg leaks the Pentagon Papers. The Supreme Court rules against Nixon's prior restraint of the New York Times.	
1972	Nixon wins re-election; Watergate break-in occurs. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein begin their investigation.	
1974	Nixon resigns. Woodward and Bernstein publish All the President's Men. Investigative journalism reaches its cultural peak.	
1975		Murtala Muhammed coup. Military rule continues. Nigerian journalism navigates between patriotic duty and institutional constraint.
1979		Return to civilian rule under Shehu Shagari. Press briefly flourishes.
1983		Second military coup, December 31st. Buhari and Idiagbon seize power.
1984		Decree No. 4 criminalises embarrassing public officers. Truth is not a defence. Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor of the Guardian convicted and jailed.
1984		Newswatch founded by Dele Giwa, Ray Ekpu, Dan Agbese, and Yakubu Mohammed

		— Nigeria's most ambitious independent journalism project
1985		Babangida coup. A more sophisticated era of press management begins.
1986		Structural Adjustment Programme introduced. Nigeria's SAP reshapes the economy and the lives of millions. The media is ill-equipped to scrutinise it.
1986		A parcel bomb kills Dele Giwa at his breakfast table, October 19th. No one is ever charged.
1987		Newswatch proscribed for six months after publishing a Buhari interview. One of its co-founders is dead. The others keep going.
1989	The Berlin Wall falls. CNN broadcasts it live. The 24-hour news era begins.	
1991	The Gulf War: 775 embedded journalists and the managed spectacle of precision bombing	The Windhoek Declaration establishes May 3 as World Press Freedom Day. African journalists articulate the case for independence.
1992		Living in Bondage — a VHS film made to sell blank cassettes — launches Nollywood
1993		June 12th election: freely held, widely regarded as fair, Moshood Abiola winning. Annulled June 23rd. The press responds with courage. The crackdown follows.
1993		Abacha seizes power, November. The darkest era of Nigerian press freedom begins.
1994		Guardian and Punch shut down. Journalists detained without trial. Newspapers seized at the printers. Some editors go into exile.
1994	The Rwandan genocide. Radio Mille Collines broadcasts the names and addresses of people to be killed. 800,000 dead in 100 days.	
1996		Kudirat Abiola assassinated June 4th while campaigning for her husband's release.
1998	The Master Settlement Agreement forces tobacco companies to release 14 million internal documents — the manufactured doubt campaign is exposed	Abacha dies June 8th. MKO Abiola dies in detention July 7th. The transition to democracy begins under Abubakar.
1999		Return to democracy, May 29th. Olusegun Obasanjo elected. The Fourth Republic begins. The press expands rapidly.
2001	9/11 and the construction of the Muslim as enemy in Western media. Al-Qaeda's media operation and the American response reshape global information warfare.	
2003	Colin Powell presents fabricated WMD evidence to the UN Security Council, February 5th. The Iraq War begins.	

2003	The Iraq War: 775 embedded journalists. The New York Times later acknowledges over-reliance on wrong sources.	
2006	Sahara Reporters founded by Omoyele Sowore in New York — diaspora journalism as accountability press	
2006	Facebook opens to the public. Twitter launches. The social media era begins.	
2007		Nigeria's worst post-independence elections. The EU observation mission records systematic failures.
2008	ProPublica founded — the non-profit journalism model emerges as an alternative to advertising dependence	
2009	Facebook shifts from chronological to algorithmic feed ranking — the engagement era begins	
2010		Nollywood produces over 1,000 films per year. The second largest film industry in the world by volume. African stories for African audiences.
2011	The Arab Spring: social media and the possibility of networked citizen revolt. And its aftermath: surveillance, crackdown, civil war.	Premium Times founded. Nigerian digital investigative journalism finds its institutional form.
2011		The 2011 elections: a genuine improvement. INEC reforms begin.
2013	Edward Snowden reveals the NSA's global surveillance architecture. He files for asylum from a Moscow airport.	
2015		Muhammadu Buhari defeats Goodluck Jonathan — the first peaceful transfer of power through the ballot in Nigerian history. Jonathan concedes before the official result.
2016	The Panama Papers: 400 journalists, 80 countries, 11.5 million documents. Coordinated global accountability journalism.	
2016	Cambridge Analytica harvests 87 million Facebook profiles without consent. Brexit. Trump. The data election era.	
2017	Daphne Caruana Galizia killed by a car bomb in Malta. Anna Politkovskaya's murder conviction in Russia.	
2018	Jamal Khashoggi murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The CIA attributes the order to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.	
2018	Genevieve Nnaji's Lionheart becomes the first Netflix original film from Nigeria	
2019	Mueller Report: Russia's Internet Research Agency reached 126 million Facebook users in 2016	

2019		Omoyele Sowore arrested and rearrested inside a courtroom. The Buhari government's relationship with the independent press on public display.
2019		Fisayo Soyombo goes undercover into Lagos prisons. Three-part series published. Officials respond.
2020		#EndSARS. The protests organised by a hashtag. The Lekki toll gate. The phones recording. The government unable to suppress the footage.
2021	The Facebook Papers: internal research showing the algorithm amplifies polarisation, withheld from the public	Twitter banned by the Nigerian government, June 5th. 222 days. VPNs spike 4,800%.
2022		Twitter ban lifted, January. The digital public sphere restored — on the state's terms.
2023		Nigeria's presidential election. BVAS. The IReV portal failure. The contested result. The Obidient movement and its aftermath.
2024	The EU Digital Services Act comes into full effect — the first major regulatory framework for platform accountability	
2024	AI-generated political content deployed at scale in multiple elections globally. The deepfake election arrives.	Prudence Okeoghene Emudianughe leads the FactCheckAfrica AI Journalism Fellowship, training journalists to identify and counter AI-generated disinformation across West Africa.

The same year. Different cities. The same question: who tells the story?

Author's Note

I want to tell you how this book began, because the beginning matters for understanding what the book is for.

I was a student of journalism and media studies in Nigeria, trying to understand how the world was shaped by the stories told about it. At the same time, I was doing other things. I was writing poetry which would be published eventually in Barren Magazine, Agbowo, and Room Magazine, and would perform at slam competitions where the audience and I were working out, together, in real time, what language could do. I would make films, learn to code because I wanted to build something that didn't yet exist. I would fact-check disinformation in Nigerian elections and study how artificial intelligence was being used both to generate false content at scale and, potentially, to detect it. I would train journalists across West Africa to navigate an information environment that was changing faster than the institutions designed to serve the public could track.

And I kept returning to the same question: why, in all the reading I was doing about media and power, was the Nigerian press tradition treated as context rather than as source? Why were the journalists who built newspapers to fight colonial land policy in 1891, who went to prison under Decree 4 rather than retract an accurate story, who kept publishing after a parcel bomb killed their editor and colleague; why were these people not at the centre of the global story about what journalism is for?

This book is my attempt to answer that question by refusing its premise; that the press was not a neutral recorder of events but an instrument of liberation or an instrument of power, and that the choice between those two things was made every day in every edition. That understanding is what this book is built on..

* * *

A word about the book's architecture, because it is unusual and the unusualness is intentional.

Every chapter except the Opening and the Final has a twin. Chapter 1A and Chapter 1B address the same theme: the birth of modern media and the colonial press, from different geographies. Chapter 2A is about Western propaganda techniques. Chapter 2B is about how those techniques were deployed in the Biafran war. The pattern continues through every pair: global media events and their Nigerian counterparts, held up beside each other not to compare them but to demonstrate that they are the same story told from different ends.

What the twin structure is insisting on, in both readings, is that these histories are not parallel in the sense of being separate and similar. They are parallel in the sense of being the same road, running in the same direction, with the same forces shaping them and that the decision to tell the global story without the Nigerian one, or the Nigerian one without the global one, produces not a partial truth but a fundamental distortion.

* * *

This book is written for journalism students, for anyone, anywhere, who consumes media and wants to understand the machinery behind what they are consuming, who wants to ask, about every story they receive, the questions this book has been trying to model from its first page: Who is telling this? What do they need me to believe? What is the story they are not telling? And what would it cost them to tell it?

These are not cynical questions. They are the questions of a person who believes that journalism, at its best, is one of the most important things a society can do for itself and who has spent enough time watching it done badly, and done well, and suppressed, and resurrected, to understand what the difference costs and what it is worth.

* * *

The book you are about to read begins with a proverb and ends with a question addressed to you. Between those two points, it covers a lot of ground from Edward

Bernays to Dele Giwa, from the Pentagon Papers to #EndSARS, from Radio Mille Collines to the Facebook Papers, from the Lagos Weekly Record of 1891 to the FactCheckAfrica newsroom of today.

It is the book I wished had existed when I was a student. I hope it is useful to you now.

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*Until the lion learns to write,
every story will glorify the hunter.*

— *West African proverb*

Now read the book.