CENSORSHIP AND ITS EFFECT ON SCHOLARSHIP ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

By

Idd W. Juma

And

Japhet Otike

Idd Juma was a postgraduate student in the Department of Library and Information Studies, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

Japhet Otike is an Associate Professor, Department of Library and Information Studies, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

Keywords: Kenya; censorship; information; Africa; information provision; information accessibility

ABSTRACT

Censorship is seen by many information professionals from the negative side. It is considered by many as an enemy of good scholarship. Very few studies have endeavoured to look at the positive side of censorship. This article has endeavoured to fill up this gap by providing an objective view of censorship. It is found that censorship has both positive and negative effects in society. The authors conclude that censorship is generally not a bad idea. However, what makes it look bad are authorities on the African continent who have abused an otherwise good and perfect policy.
INTRODUCTION

In today's world, knowledge is supreme. It is the power that keeps the world spinning and spinning in the right direction. Without it, the world would no doubt be subdued in perpetual darkness, too deep to even see and recognise ourselves. The spirit of scholarship is the path along which knowledge is attained.

Since time immemorial, man has greatly depended on the hand of scholarship to help him advance himself and further meet all his needs in this troubled world. However, this endeavour has not been so smooth. With numerous barricades here and there, the scholarly man has learnt to survive with the harsh world.

It is, or so it has been assumed that censorship is one of the major barricades that have inhibited the natural growth and thrive of knowledge and scholarship. Nevertheless, is it rational to take this assumption to be wholesomely true? Is it absolutely authentic to claim that censorship has lived to be the most dreadful enemy of scholarship? If so, how and why? It is in view of these burning questions that an effort has been made in this paper to try to bring to the limelight key issues relating to censorship as it pertains to scholarship.

THE BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF CENSORSHIP

As to whether or not censorship is a great enemy of good scholarship, it would be far from being rational to simply say, yes or no, in such a cheap fashion. It is a very well known natural fact that every dark side has a brighter face on the opposite side. Similarly, the phenomenon of censorship cannot be fairly looked at from a one eyed perspective. Looking at censorship from the dark side alone would make the bright side dazzle the whole effort to nothing. In light of this, therefore, it can only be fair to examine the effects of censorship from both sides of the coin - its strengths and weaknesses.
The strengths of censorship

In giving a critical thinking to the aspect of censorship it may be perhaps fruitful to compare it with other phenomena in real life situations. If we may take the example of a hoe, this is a very good tool that has seen man through stages of agricultural development regarding the positive use to which it has been put to. However, the same agricultural tool could easily be turned into a lethal weapon to injure or even kill. So, it looks like in determining whether something is good or bad it all depends on how it is being used. In the same respect, the pioneers of censorship cannot totally be blamed as it may not have been their initial intention to make the whole idea the death penalty to the spirit of scholarship. In this regard, we can, therefore, look at the strengths of censorship in terms of the following role that censorship plays in society:

Political security

For any given nation to stand and develop, there must be some kind of ample security in the political machinery. This is quite so in the sense that in the modern world, law and order are the most fundamental requirements for the survival of any nation. Besides this, it should not be taken for granted that every nation has some people with varying degrees of normality whether in the physical or the psychological domains. For the latter category, it ought to be appreciated that they have the ability to say and write anything regardless of its impact and effects on the security of the country. It is, therefore proper that the people of any given nation be protected from the subversive literature which may destabilise the political system of their country and therefore, lead to political unrest. Looking at censorship from this angle, then, it can be confidently disputed that censorship has been a barrier to scholarship. On the contrary, it has been established law and order which provides a conducive environment for scholarly work. Obviously, no work of scholarship can ever take place in an environment full of political insecurity or turmoil.
Cultural heritage

The survival of man through adverse times has greatly depended on the way he has managed to develop and conserve his way of life consummated in his culture. Culture in this sense has been the store of knowledge that has enabled man to reproduce some of his various aspects of life at some latter time and develop on them. Without culture, the developments that man has realised would not be as diversified as they are now since there would be so much time wasted by people clashing by doing the same things at the same time. In this respect therefore, it should be noted that the culture of man has been accurately conserved through literature and scholarship. Every community seems to have managed to develop its own cultural system that in a way helps to colour the broader global culture of mankind. It would therefore be unfair to the whole world community for some given cultural system to try to dominate and possibly out-face other seemingly minor but highly important cultural systems. In this respect, censorship may be quite instrumental in protecting the indigenous cultural systems from the adverse effects of the alien ones. This is mainly because, the scholars of a given nation must be encouraged to continue developing their own cultural systems through scholarly work than promoting alien ones. This issue has badly affected the African continent in that many African scholars have continued developing foreign culture through writing while leaving their own to die out.

Social order

It is commonly said that the world is all about people. Without them, the world would certainly not be the same. The world has developed to serve the needs of the human society. Therefore, it is incumbent that the social order that has helped to fuel this development must be respected and hence protected. In this regard, therefore, indigenous scholars must, for instance, be protected from any scholarly material that instigates them against a people of a different race. It is rather obvious that men must live in peace together so as to learn from each other and continue carrying the burner of scholarship. By reading racist literature, for instance, this would not amount to scholarship. Instead, it would lead to hatred which is likely to kill the spirit of scholarship. Therefore, by censoring people from anti-social literature, it will be a sure way of helping them make the best out of the world of scholarship.
Religious hegemony

In many parts of the world, religious issues have always been treated with a lot of sensitivity. Any slight misunderstanding could easily lead to violence which blemishes the calm environment required for scholarly development. By censoring materials that could easily cause religious animosity - a recipe for violence, the society would generally be protected from the death of the spirit of scholarship. For instance, in the case of blasphemous publications the like of *Satanic Verses*, the authorisation of such literature in a country like Kenya would have certainly led to a state of unrest which is not conducive to scholarly work. With the censorship of this kind of literature, the Kenya Government has contrary to what many people think, helped to foster an environment of peace which is required for scholastic development.

The weaknesses of censorship

In spite of the positive remarks that have been cited in favour of censorship, it is worth noting that a road can never be straight all through. Quite a number of countries have been known to abuse the noble role of censorship to the extent that the whole idea has been coloured black. In respect of the African continent, Ashworth and Fichardt (1992) had this to say:

"As many Africans have sought to reinforce their hold on power by controlling the flow of information, writers have been victims of a wide range of human rights violations."

Considering this therefore, the dark side of censorship can be looked at in terms of the following tribulations:

Stifling creativity

In their commitment and devotion to kill the power of scholarship in society, many governments in the world have lived to be hyper-sensitive to the written work. In Kenya, for instance, the government in 1976 banned Ngugi wa Thiong'o's play *Ngaahika Ndenda* (I will Marry you if I want). For this, Ngugi was consequently detained without trial for nearly a year. The play was an attack on the injustices tolerated and perpetrated in post-independence Kenya. According to
Chakava (1996), this happened when Ngugi had just embarked on writing in local languages as a way of developing the local culture. The tribulations he went through were terrifying and this no doubt adversely affected his creativity. This is just one of the many examples where the talent of a writer has been nearly terminated through the abuse of censorship.

**Suppression of freedom of expression**

In quite a number of cases where the force of censorship has been less shrewdly applied, the main consequence has been maximum suppression of freedom of expression. For instance, it has been common that where "dangerous writers" have been allowed to continue living in their mother countries, they have been seriously warned not to either write at all or communicate with the outside world. A good example here is the case of the poet and journalist Don Mattera of South Africa who was not allowed to publish in the country or send his work abroad for publication. His career as a journalist was strictly curtailed and the best he could do was to work as a sub-editor. He was forbidden to attend public meetings. In his contribution in *Index on Censorship* he states:

"And so I moved into this lonely world of the forgotten, the world of the twilight people and you die. I died. It was a heavy dying. And I stopped writing. And I refused to write. I couldn't see the purpose of writing again."

This kind of suppression has quite adversely affected the spirit of scholarship in that the most talented writers are waged off the course of writing thus giving way to bogus writers who seem to stoop to the governing regimes to thrive in the direction that conceivably takes the spirit of scholarship to its heaviest downfall.

**Eliminating critical elements**

Anybody who has gone through the process of scholarship would certainly appreciate the role played by criticism as a catalyst in the development of scholastic endeavours. Man is naturally imperfect. However, due to the phenomenon of natural balance, this imperfection can only be dealt with through the use of criticism. Every scholar should freely make his point however unfounded it may be for others to make critical contributions to assist him to shape it to the endeared state of perfection. Without criticism, the spirit of scholarship is dead. A good example here is a case where
a scholar wants to publish some scholarly materials. During this process, the scholar has to accept his/her imperfection and agree to give out his/her work to others to review. Without this critical process of editing, the writer would never be able to perfect his/her work to a scholarly level. Many governments in the world do not accept criticism which is essential for scholastic development. This abuse has made censorship an enemy of good scholarship.

**Tailoring scholarly work**

In a democratic society, every man or woman is fully entitled to his/her own ideas. It is, therefore, fair that in the way of communicating these ideas to other people, the ideas should be left in the most original form. This requirement has further been fostered by the copyright law that is imbedded in the state laws of many countries. However, even in those states that claim to be democratic and enforces the copyright law, this adverse effect of censorship has continued to be sustained. In this case, many writers have been forced to alter or change their original works to suit the whims of the dominant class. This is quite unscholarly in that in most cases, the writers have a better idea they would like to convey to the people and altering such works defeat the value of continuity, integrity and therefore, the whole purpose of such piece of work. Much of scholarly materials have been lost in this kind of screening measures which have made censorship a social and more so, a scholastic enemy.

**Preventing writers from reaching their audience**

As Ashworth (1992) has precisely put it:

"Rigorous censorship laws enable governments to keep writers under a tight reign. This grip is reinforced by direct or indirect supervision of the activities of the writer's associations."

This prohibitive mechanism which has been commonly applied in open performances such as songs, dances and especially works of poetry and drama, has been done to ensure that the writer or artist cannot reach his/her envisaged audience. This, has in the long run, fostered suppression of talent on the side of the artist and learning on the part of the audience who are likely to acquire some skills from the artist for their personal scholastic development.
Physical abuse and psychological intimidation

In developing states of Africa, for instance, many writers such as Tandundu Bisiki of the former Zaire (presently, the Democratic Republic of Congo) have been tortured and subjected to intimidation. In the case of Bisiki, the writer became a political prisoner in 1976 at the age of twenty-two after writing his play: *Forward and back or the Death of the University*. Under these circumstances, African governments have devised stringent security laws that grant unlimited powers to the security agencies to detain without trial or charge, search premises without search warrants, and seize personal belongings. In most of such cases, the definition of subversive literature is so equivocally defined that many writers are obliged to write under the psychological burden of knowing that every offence of subversion encompasses anything which contradicts the government's official version of the truth. This weapon of intimidation works so much against the spirit of scholarship that writers have to weigh and even alter their own ideas to suit those of the official authority which may not necessarily be the true ones. This force against truth is in itself the antithesis of scholarship.

Deprivation of vital material needs

One of the strategies used by governments to censure scholarship is the use of rationing techniques. In this case, the government ensures that the number of students entering public universities, for instance, is highly controlled to a manageable level. With the fear that too many students in academic institutions may cause a major serge in the ideological framework of people, the government would ensure that such are few enough to be effectively monitored by the existing security resources. This rationing may also be done by ensuring that the state controls the number of facilities that can be availed to the students at any given time. In such situations, the state would even hesitate to dispense with such facilities as printers and research permits so as not to allow such institutions of higher learning to have the full ability and mandate to print and publish own scholarly materials. Another measure used to control publications is in instances where the state gives monopoly to a select few publishers preferably state owned firms to publish certain materials. In Kenya, for instance, the responsibility of publishing school books has, as precisely put by Chakava (1996), rested on the two government funded firms, the Kenya Literature Bureau and the
Jomo Kenyatta Foundation. This is a deliberate attempt by the government to monitor every detail that is communicated to the wider school audience. This move has effectively driven away the spirit of competition in the publishing industry. Through the use of these throttling techniques, many scholarly institutions have been helpless in publishing information materials requisite for the enhancement of scholarship, making censorship the deadly virus that continues to eat away the flesh of scholarship and knowledge.

**Forcing writers into exile and fostering hostile environment to intellectual and cultural pursuits**

Throughout the history of scholarship, it has not been uncommon for many writers or artists to be exiled from their own mother nations. Talking about the same issue in respect of Africa, Ashworth asserts that:

"The fact that a staggering number of African writers have gone into exile else-where in Africa or left the continent altogether, inevitably has an impact on the writers left behind."

The truth of the foregoing observation need not be over-emphasised. Africa has for instance lost most of her most talented and glorious scholars through this kind of episodes. In the case of Kenya, for instance, several writers have left the country after being jailed, detained or harassed to live and work abroad. The most notable ones include Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Abdillatif Abdalla, Ali Mazrui, Maina wa Kinyatti, etc. As Chakava (1996) correctly puts it:

"[Ngugi's] absence from the Kenyan literary scene has seriously affected the country's creative atmosphere and has been a great disincentive to young writers."

**Prolonged detention without trial**

In a number of African countries where dictatorial governance still prevails, very few of the exiled or incriminated writers have escaped without some kind of detention or confinement. For instance, in Malawí under the Banda regime, the Malawian police on 25th September 1987 arrested Jack Mapanje, the country's best known poet. He was finally released on 11th May 1991. During the three and a half years of detention, he was held at Mikuyu Prison near Zomba in Southern Malawí.
He was never charged and the state authorities gave no explanation for his arrest and detention. This kind of behaviour has greatly affected the spirit of scholarship in the sense that besides the feeling of intimidation, a locked up writer would languish in prison for a very long time without getting access to the right facilities, time, and space to write again. The period such writers spend in prison is a serious waste to scholarship.

**Control of publications and confiscation of equipment**

One of the commonest ways of complying with censorship requirements in some African states, is to seek licences and publish materials under controlled surveillance. In such cases, copies of the publications have to be availed to the state authorities for their approval and control. These stringent requirements make publishing so cumbersome and time consuming because the publisher or the artist has to go through so many bureaucratic processes that are so repulsive. The government requirements slow down the speed at which scholarly publications are produced thereby affecting the efficient production of scholarly materials. On the other hand, those considered not complying with the state censorship rules are also punished in a diversity of ways that include among others, confiscation of publishing equipment such as computers, printers, etc. This further denies the publisher the ability to continue with the scholarly process of publishing.

**CONCLUSION**

This article has provided a detailed account on whether or not the restrictive law of censorship is an enemy to good scholarship. In this connection therefore, the article gives a two sided approach where both the strengths and weaknesses of censorship have been examined. It can however be concluded that censorship is not wholesomely an enemy to good scholarship. What matters really is how it is implemented. In this respect therefore, the positive side of censorship has been highlighted in terms of its role in the society. However, it is essentially the abuse of censorship that has made it work against the spirit of scholarship.
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ashworth, Lindsey and Liesel Fichardt (1992). Writers and Human rights abuses in Africa. 


