

A new era for African media

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The advent of digital media has turned the media landscape upside down. The news cycle moves at lightning speed, thanks to live tweeting, blogging and citizen journalism, all unknown just a few years ago.



Image by 123RF

Fibre optics have revolutionised the telecommunications industry, the internet is getting cheaper and faster and more communities are logging on, even in remote areas in Africa. More people use their smartphones to receive digital content than ever before.

To remain accessible, conventional media practitioners in Africa are adapting to a new media world that is time-sensitive and more interactive. Advocacy journalism, in particular, is growing exponentially—bloggers and citizen journalists are mobilising for various causes, including good governance.

Although a lot has changed in media technology and operations over the last 15 years, society still looks to the media to play its traditional role—to inform, educate and entertain.

In Africa the media plays an even more critical role, that of deepening and institutionalising democracy. Citizens need to be informed as nations take on new responsibilities in a globalised world.

“Media plays an important role in building an informed society. Citizens need credible information from a media that can skillfully moderate debate and provoke meaningful conversations that can lead to transforming Africa,” says Eric Chinje, chief executive officer of the African Media Initiative (AMI), a Nairobi-based pan-African organisation that seeks to strengthen the continent’s media.

To play its role effectively, according to Chinje, the media must see itself as instrumental to ensuring and improving the quality of life in society.

“Journalists see themselves as watchdogs. Instead, I see the media as a leader. Watchdogs just sit down and watch, but a leader stands up and leads. You have to walk and work,” Chinje said in an interview with *Africa Renewal*.

Development of society

Africa needs journalism that innovates and supports innovation in a modernising continent, he says, one that not only grows, but promotes growth and the development of society. It needs journalism that not only generates the ideas that are the engine of social transformation, but also moderates the debates that emerge from these societal changes.

This year, the link between media freedom and sustainable development was emphasised during World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by world leaders.

“The importance of free and independent media to inform the citizens of the world is crucial to the achievement of the SDGs,” said Irina Bokova, the director-general of UNESCO, adding that at this time of turbulence and change across the world, including new challenges that require global cooperation and action, people need readable, reliable and independent information.

“Free and independent media... is very instrumental in cleaning up corruption and enhancing bureaucratic accountability,” says John Mukum Mbaku, a senior fellow at the US-based Brookings Institution’s Africa Growth Initiative — a group that conducts policy research and analysis to help achieve sustainable economic development in Africa.

“Investigative reports about corruption not only inform the public about venality in the public sector but can also force the government to take action to improve efficiency in the public sector and enhance economic growth and development,” Mbaku told *Africa Renewal*.

In Nigeria, for example, during the 2015 presidential election, the media helped the opposition carry its message to the people and stepped up in forcing government accountability. In Ghana, an investigative journalist, Anas Aremeyaw Anas, has broken dozens of stories of corruption and organised crime.

The increase in investigative stories exposing corruption in many other countries across the continent, even those with authoritarian regimes, has helped put governments on their toes. In Kenya, North Africa, and South Africa, the media have been notably vocal in keeping the citizens informed and exposing ills facing society.

Still, Chinje thinks a lot more needs to be done: “We see a few cases, far between, of the right stuff. Once in a while, one can spot one or two good stories, but that is not enough to light up the profession.”

The media itself needs to engage in capacity building, he says, which the AMI is trying to bring to the continent through training.

“Media technology has changed, but the thinking among the editors has not changed. Politically, socially, the populations, everything around us has changed, but the media has not rethought its purpose in a changing Africa,” says Chinje. He proposes greater debate and awareness among the media themselves so they can “rediscover” their informational role in society.

While few dispute media's importance in society, the numerous challenges they face in Africa threaten to reverse the gains made so far.

Digital media were welcomed across the continent, but technological adaptation to new media technology continues to pose a major challenge in many media houses. Unreliable internet connectivity and outdated equipment mean that journalists have no access to the critical tools of their trade, or must make do with inadequate systems in a digital world, which may hinder their work.

However, according to Chinje, the biggest challenge for journalists in Africa is a lack of capacity to do their work effectively. "You cannot inform if you are not informed," he says, adding that many of them lack training in interpreting complex information, including data that needs skilled interpretation.

Media organisations across the continent, lacking an independent funding source, have historically struggled with financing shortfalls. This is partly because the majority depends on capricious government advertising to stay afloat. Any small criticism could result in the cancellation of adverts worth thousands of dollars. In many countries the government or its agencies are the biggest advertisers.

While governments seek favourable media coverage, often sending out self-serving press releases that tout the good job they are doing in governing the country, journalists are obliged to look for the cracks and contradictions in these messages.

Traditional media (newspapers, TV, radio) in Africa and worldwide are also losing revenue streams as readers and listeners shift toward free digital content. As audiences migrate to other news venues, traditional media's influence and, by extension, advertising revenues diminish.

As a result of media's newfound courageous voice and anticorruption exposés, press freedom is in jeopardy in Africa, with the media being increasingly targeted for restraint or even shut down in some countries.

Nigeria, for example, tried unsuccessfully this year to enact a vaguely worded social media bill that suggested draconian punishments for saying the wrong things online. Chad, Congo Brazzaville and Uganda blocked social media during elections, and the move was contemplated even in such professed democratic countries as Ghana.

In Liberia, the government this year shut down the privately owned Voice FM. In 2015, journalists were killed on the job in five countries—the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan. Whether from government, armed groups or terrorists, threats and attacks on journalists make it risky for them to do their work.

As the digital media world expands, new challenges have emerged. Without editorial oversight, information is unchecked and rumours gain credence over truth. Tales of corruption and other gaffs by public officials spread like wildfire on the internet, making governments even more reluctant to give press interviews than they ever were.

Apart from government censorship, which makes it difficult for various African media outlets to perform their jobs effectively, Mbaku says that they grapple with poor or non-existent infrastructure for printing and distributing newspapers, poor internet connectivity and inadequate preparation of media workers.

Way forward

To build better strategies and survive the turbulence, media providers need to adapt to the demands of their society.

The most crucial survival strategy for Africa's media is to migrate to cellphones and the internet, and to generate content in local languages so it is accessible to a majority of citizens. Except for a few media outlets in North Africa that publish in Arabic and a few around East Africa that publish in Swahili, most media in Africa use English, French, Spanish or Portuguese—all European languages. This means news content may not easily be accessible to the majority of citizens, who are not literate in these languages.

The media and government in many African countries may be at loggerheads, yet the media is considered the “fourth estate” after the three arms of government—the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. “Government and media are two sides of the same coin. If they fight they destroy the coin,” remarks Chinje. “The government brings policy and the media should bring information about those policies to enrich the ideas and improve their implementation for the good of society.”

African governments need to enable the media to function effectively as an instrument of development and peaceful coexistence. This, according to Mbaku, can be accomplished by constitutionally guaranteeing press freedom and removing many of the bottlenecks, such as government censorship, that have constrained the ability of the press to carry out its mission effectively and unhindered.

Source: [*Africa Renewal*](#).

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