

# Terrorists, radio waves and Africa's war against 'biased reports'

Raphael Tuju, once a famous newsreader on the Voice of Kenya's evening news, recently tried to take Kenya's voice to Britain and reverse 50 years of one-way broadcasting.

By [Charles Wachira](#) 21 Feb 2007

The BBC has beamed British news and views to Kenya since the 1950s. A recent BBC report trumpets that its service has the same impact in Kenya as Britain's most popular radio station has in the UK.

## Applying for unbiased broadcasting

In November 2003, Tuju, now Kenya's minister for information and tourism, visited London with the head of the national Kenya Broadcasting Company Wachira Waruru to apply for an FM radio licence.

"We wanted to be given the chance to open a radio station that would give unbiased reports about the country," Tuju said.

Tuju's request was turned down. UK broadcasting laws only allowed European companies to run a radio station in Britain, and all the licences for the London FM spectrum are taken until 2010.

The law has since changed so non-EU residents can now apply, but the limited FM spectrum remains a problem. Some companies, like Philippine broadcaster ABS-CBN Global, are using satellite technology as an alternative, beaming radio programmes to Londoners' television sets. But this limits them to subscribers of satellite companies – Sky, the largest in the UK, has seven million.

## Tourism takes a knock

Tuju's comment about biased reporting echoes the thoughts of many in Kenya concerned about negative coverage by the Western media, especially in the wake of Al-Qaeda attacks over the last six years.

Kenya's tourist industry, its third largest foreign exchange earner, has lost \$125 million since the US embassy in Nairobi was bombed in 1998, because of a Western perception that it was an unsafe destination. Immediately after the attack, European and US authorities advised their citizens not to travel to Kenya.

The situation worsened when the British government banned UK flights to Mombasa and Nairobi in May 2003 after threats of a terrorist attack on Western targets.

Tuju immediately appeared on international television and radio stations to broadcast the message that although Nairobi was concerned about the threat of terrorism, it believed it had taken all the precautions necessary – and Kenya was no more vulnerable to a terrorist attack than any other tourist destination. It worked. The flight ban was lifted a month later, and only the US travel advisory remains today.

## Double standards

Western governments reacted very differently to Spain's terrorist attacks in March 2004, which killed 200

people and injured another 1,400. The British and US governments advised tourists to be vigilant, but not to avoid Spain altogether.

Tuju commented on this difference at a March Commonwealth ministers meeting in Malaysia: "We raised the issue of double standards. We found it very ironic that the recent advisories were issued against Kenya, while tourists were encouraged to visit Spain as a show of solidarity following the bomb attack in Madrid."

The Kenyan government has spent \$13 million since 1998 on global advertising and trips for foreign journalists. Tourism is on the rise again but product development manager of the Kenya Tourist Board, Julius Njeru, believes a radio station in Britain (costing about \$10 million) is still needed to spruce up Kenya's image overseas.

## **Africa's negative foreign image**

Kenya is not the only country which needs an image makeover in the West. Africa as a whole receives little coverage in the Western media, and almost all of it is negative.

Ezekiel Mutau, secretary general of the Kenya Union of Journalists, says: "Generally the foreign press deliberately creates the impression that Africa is a continent of problems only. Nothing good in their opinion comes out of Africa except coups, AIDS and other catastrophes so if Kenya were to launch a radio station in the UK some of the misinformation could be corrected."

"Africa's image problem in the West is almost insoluble," says Cameron Duodu, former editor of DRUM magazine in West Africa and now reporting on African issues from London. While Western media gatekeepers believe that negative stories interest their consumers, the people of the West have a profound sympathy for the problems of poor countries, he adds.

"The only way out is for media personnel in the West to stop gazing at their own navels and to try really to understand what is going on with respect to two-thirds of the human race," Duodu says.

There is only one state-owned radio station in Sub-Saharan Africa which broadcasts outside the continent Sudan News Agency which transmits programmes to Europe.

Edwin Nyutho, broadcast lecturer at the University of Nairobi's school of journalism, says when American CNN television covers anything from Africa, they take a "significantly ugly turn" and reinforce the stereotype of a continent "lacking anything good worth reporting".

But, he says, if a London-based radio station is to be effective at redressing the balance, it must be professional and avoid broadcasting propaganda.

## **New sound of Africa**

The Kenyan Broadcasting Corporation was formed in 1961 and, although officially independent of the government, it has been used by successive governments to broadcast propaganda. The BBC and Voice of America gained popularity in Kenya as a result. But since President Mwai Kibaki was elected in 2002, KBC has changed its management and improved its programming and audience ratings.

Western governments still use shortwave as the main way to project foreign policy overseas, according to Radio Netherlands. Large broadcasters like the BBC and Voice of America need only one licence to beam

programmes worldwide from Britain and the US – and they find large audiences. Eighty-three million people a week tune into Voice of America, most of them outside the US.

But the sound of radio in Africa is changing, with a new boom in private FM stations which are winning audiences both from foreign broadcasters and national public radio stations.

For now foreign companies cannot compete on FM. Most developing countries have laws preventing foreign broadcasters from setting up shop – but that may soon change.

The European Union and US are trying to force 109 countries to open up their borders to foreign news agencies. They say that as members of the World Trade Organization, which promotes the free trade of goods and services, these countries should liberalise their radio and television industries. Kenya is on the list but has not yet responded to the 2002 bid.

No-one from Africa has. They now face the renewed prospect of losing their domestic audiences to foreign media companies.

**This feature is published by courtesy of [Panos Features](#)**

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