

Conditions impeding growth of African journalists

An assistant professor and director at the Institute for International Journalism at Ohio University's Scripps College of Communication, Dr. Yusuf Kalyango last week told a health and development communication workshop in Kenya that bad conditions that prevail in Africa are impeding the growth of African journalists.

 By [Gregory Gondwe](#) 4 Jul 2011



Kalyango, who for 13 years worked as an African correspondent and reporter for Reuters and CNN's InSight Africa, said some journalists are still working in militarised states, while others in totalitarian regimes, while others work under uncondusive working conditions with less or no salaries at all.

"You have to give a lot of praise and respect to African journalists to be able to do the kind of reporting they do under the conditions within which they report," he said.

He said it is funny to expect a journalist who is sleeping in a shack in a heavily diseased slum to understand what a better and healthy life is.

Challenges for African journalists

"Do you expect such a journalist to communicate the dangers of malaria prevention when he is putting up in a shack that is surrounded by cesspools that are providing a breeding ground for mosquitoes," asked Kalyango when he was presenting a paper called "Journalism training, practice and the national development agenda," during the conference.

He said given these challenges you still have some reporters who report on health despite a lack of training. Journalists are still getting exposed to very deadly diseases, but they go there and risk their lives to cover

"I remember personally I went to cover ebola when it broke out and I knew I would have died within three hours but I did it, and I saw how people were dying, the pain that they were going through, but that's like a breaking story that you cover once in a year, but you know these journalists go and cover stories every single day that actually has some component of health," explains Kalyango.

In an interview with Bizcommunity after his presentation, Kalyango said there is a lot to be done for the African journalist to cut his place amongst the successful media practitioners of the world.

Influences in private-owned media

"What has got to be done has to do with the ownership system," he says, "The way that many privately-owned media organisations are set up is that you still have a lot of influence from owners to the journalists: telling them what they should not report, giving them parameters on what they cannot expose, especially when it comes to governments that give them licences to operate."

He said owners also create conditions that actually impede journalists to develop where they are paid less "They [journalists] are likely not to produce quality investigative reports because they cannot afford to do that," he said.

He said media owners, proprietors for privately-owned media organisations in Africa can invest in their best resources and those are journalists to make sure that they not only produce quality work but they are compensated adequately with better remuneration packages.

More training and providing better tools for journalists to do their work and also to open up relationships between journalists and health practitioners so that both parties are well-informed on how they can communicate better and interpret medical jargons to a lay man to citizens who are not as highly educated as journalists is one other way.

Investing in various institutional support

"The infrastructure has to be set up both at the organisational level, and the state level and also some external support, all those players need to be in place for journalists to be well-prepared for better reporting on issues pertaining to public health," he said.

The assistant professor says, the way it is used right now, journalists are really hard working given the conditions within which they work.

"And I believe African journalists would do a better job if conditions were made better by organisations who fund media performance," he said.

Governments that really want citizens to live a healthy life, he said also need to invest in individual journalists and not just conferences and different kinds of institutional support.

"[Governments] need to develop the individuals for their own development in order to be better off in terms of focusing on the issue of helping the public.

Kenya's deputy prime minister, who also doubles as minister of local government, Musalia Mudavadi said the government understands the need to invest in media practitioners and this is the reason the conference was called.

"Because we want to find out ways in which we can improve communication about health for the development of our people. We all know that health citizens determine the level of development in nations," he said.

Health, key component of 2030s vision

In Kenya, the government top dog said health is a key component of the country's vision 2030s social pillar whose mission is to invest in health for people of Kenya, with the eventual aim of enabling the country to become a medium-level income country.

"Making crucial information on health available requires qualified doctors to share their knowledge and educated media professionals to spread that knowledge. It also requires those who train media professionals to impart skills on how to communicate information on health," he said.

Collectively, networks should help African governments to improve delivery of health information to the people.

"In particular, how the quality of journalism and media education can enhance the skills of the media fraternity in communicating information," he said.

The deputy prime minister also said this education for journalists has to also consider this era when media technologies for radio, television and mobile phones are undergoing a revolution where they are now facing competition from use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, to transmit information.

ABOUT GREGORY GONDWE

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