



THE CASE FOR AFRICA

Sierra Leone-born **Ayo Johnson**, founder and director of news media house **Viewpoint Africa**, uses cutting edge technology to make the case for a progressive and developing Africa. Media across Africa is a huge topic – we singled out some issues and asked Ayo how the African media landscape is changing

It is the depressing and the sad news about Africa that usually makes it onto breaking news across TV screens across the world – death, destruction and disease. It's what sells. I feel there needs to be a balance between the positive and the negative - this is where Viewpoint Africa is going to come in. We have a formula whereby our news sources on the ground get a significant slice of the profits, and we are currently seeking media companies who can partner with us moving forward.

Central to the media debate is the power struggle between government control of media and independent journalism. What is happening in Sierra Leone?

A national public broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), was formed in April 2010 by a merger of the former state-operated Sierra Leone Broadcasting Services (SLBS) and Radio Unamsil, the United Nations radio network in Sierra Leone linked to the peace-keeping mission. The aim is to boost the independence of the media. SLBC claims to be truly independent but the concern is, how independent

can the SLBS be if the same editors, producers, managers that were part of the old SLBC are only changing hats. And who should decide who the main players in those media outlets should be? The UN have been in that country for over ten years, trying to address the issues and are seen as a credible player. The question is how much of their legacy will be affected should this newly forged relationship with the SLBC not work at all.

In Kenya the government is clamping down on media yet new commercial initiatives are being launched.

In the 2008 elections, there were violent struggles between the two camps around Mwai Kibaki – now the President – and Raila Odinga – now the Prime Minister. Back then the journalists were accused of inciting anarchy, but they were only doing their job. Currently the government is introducing rather draconian reforms: journalists can be arrested, media outlets reined in, equipment confiscated, telephones tapped. It puts pressure on journalists – you have to be in one political camp or in both camps if you want to survive.

The Nation and Standard media

groups have elements that are independent but there is very little independent journalism and quality news. Kenya is steeped in corruption, huge sums of money disappear, and independent reporting of these news is not seen.

What is Zimbabwe media focusing on?

The world has become so obsessed with Mugabe and the fact that ZANU-PF have chosen him as their leader for life, that Prime Minister Tsvangirai's efforts to revive the economy are being ignored. It's a sad story, he is the real loser, he has stabilised the country and is trying to turn the economy around but is not getting the attention and support from the media. I can't see how this is going to change unless in the next elections Tsvangirai wins outright and does not have to enter into this marriage of convenience with Mugabe.

Are there models for how things can be turned around in Africa?

There are several models. The economy of Rwanda has been transformed beyond all recognition, in fact Rwanda is making the headlines with its female MPs which outnumber the male

members of parliament. There is also Ghana doing amazing things, developing industries from health to education and doing extremely well but they have had a stable government for a longer period of time.

On the other hand, if you look at Liberia, where Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is in office as the first female president in Africa, interestingly, when she came to power the media was there and now that she is trying to address the problems and needs the media to support her, the media seem to have vanished. The stories that make the headlines around the world about Africa are mostly negative stories or stories which the media touch once and don't repeat. International media can only address an issue once or twice but for there to be prolonged pressure and for that story not to disappear the local media have to take it on and it will be their responsibility to ensure that it is pushed.

How are the media supporting the drive against corruption?

In Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda, you find a passion to eradicate corruption, driven by the presidents of these four countries. And the media are giving support, forming a new relationship. For example the Ghanaian president has refused to accept gifts from anyone, fearful that accepting gifts may be associated with corruption. The Liberian president is encouraging individuals to give information about corrupt officials. The majority of the population in Africa is aware that corruption is a big issue in their countries – to see corruption being tackled from the top is a step in the right direction.

The media in Somalia?

You don't have a functioning government, it only controls a small portion of the country, the vast majority of the country is controlled

by insurgents. The fascination for me personally is that this is the story that is being pushed by the media, combined with the piracy issue. The pirates have used the media as a gateway to negotiating ransoms. The media has failed to address Somalia's true problems – poverty, job creation, war trauma, people still living in camps. When you don't have a functioning government, the safety of journalists is compromised. When independent media outlets send journalists in, or when journalists go in under their own steam, they are likely to be captured. This is not going to be resolved overnight.

What about Eritrea?

It's the only country in Africa with complete media silence. The journalists do not have any freedom at all. It is difficult to get journalists into that country to stay with, and those few on the ground have difficulty working. The government is very strict on controls and permits.

Do African audiences want hard news or escape from their daily life in the form of entertainment?

Africans in general like to be informed. They like choice. Sometimes that choice is difficult. You have the problem with quality, but above and beyond that, Africans want to be able to afford their own media outlets. Africans are yearning to report information from their own perspective but they are unlikely to have that until they have true independent media outlets, and that comes with an element of liberalisation evolving over time. We are miles away from having an outlet which would be able to rival the CNNs and BBCs of this world to tell the story in an African way. There are small networks dotted all over the place, you have the African Channel, AIT from Nigeria, Vox Africa. But they don't have the size and the financial

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muscle to afford a global presence. And that is what is missing.

What about mobile?

Some of the landlines are not working properly in Africa, and the arrival of the mobile phone meant that people in remote areas could have access to health services – for example long-distance diagnosis – and it became a vital tool for traders. It is used in many different contexts but the application of media technology for the purpose of bringing TV to the mobile phone through a 3G network of some description, that will be more difficult. It is one thing for a poor African in rural Africa to afford a mobile, it is another thing for them to pay an additional subscription for additional services. That's where I think it will fail simply because 70% of Africans live in some degree of poverty.

And the outlook for the future?

I would expect that, simply as a matter of survival, Africa will have unified in some shape or form, to be able to compete and negotiate at the WTO, the World Bank etc. It needs to be represented by one umbrella organisation to have that muscle to negotiate effectively.

Out of this unification will then evolve one TV channel to sell the African message realistically to the rest of the world – a channel to rival the BBC and CNNs and Al Jazeera of this world. I could see two bureaux in every African country representing that new media entity.

And hopefully that would push a message of hope and peace, a message that truly defines what Africa is about. Africa is liberalising in various quarters and the continent as a whole is changing. China is playing a big part in Africa, and I can see China being a major player in making crucial decisions in the media too.

Ayo Johnson, thank you.



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