

The untold 21st century story



By Tawana Kupe

The untold breaking story of our time is the digital revolution.

The information revolution is, in the words of the poet Yeats, “utterly, utterly changing”.

Information is the central determinant of decision-making in all spheres of life including leisure, pleasure and intimate relationships.

It will change the way politics is conducted; economies work and how business operates. More importantly it is changing how media produce and disseminate information.

It is changing our understanding of who is the producer of information. Huge networks of private citizens are now producing information. And it is changing media-audience relationships.

Current traditional media gather information and disseminate it, but the interactivity of ICTs allow for:

- ♦ the manipulation and reproduction of information;
- ♦ the engagement with other producers;
- ♦ the engagement with audiences.

ICTs work in an increasingly horizontal, democratising way. There is no longer a monopoly on production by the traditional media. Dialogue is greatly expanded.

To quote Yeats again, the information revolution can also be a “terrible beauty”. It has great potential for democracy and development, but if not harnessed properly could cause harm (here think of the way paedophiles use the power of the Internet to procure children for sex), and it demands a lot from media and reporting.

Journalists therefore need to reflect on their own reporting practices.

Guilty

The media in Africa are guilty of neglecting and mishandling the story of the African Information Society as part of the global Information Society. They have not reported on policy initiatives or on ICT issues in an

informative and accessible way.

They have failed to report on Nepad’s programmes of detailed policy initiatives and its comprehensive programmes for education and media.

Media provide one of the principle routes to public participation in policy making around ICTs and the media have not been saying what the content of that is, or how people should become part of the initiatives.

Why have they failed at this?

Nepad’s ICT policy issues are not prioritised on news agendas. The priorities are the peer review mechanism and Robert Mugabe. Reporters seem not to have understood that Nepad is not a regime change mechanism for Zimbabwe!

There is lack of in-depth knowledge among journalists and editors about information technologies.

Most journalists in Africa have not learnt how to use ICTs.

Journalists report events and not processes. Development and democracy are processes and building an African Information Society is a process. Events are transitory. Not all processes can be reduced to events. This means that by not reporting the process of change to the Information Society journalists are not monitoring and cataloguing it, and are not infusing corrective action when it is needed.

Contextualised reporting would put Africa and ICTs into the debate on the global Information Society.

*Prof Tawana Kupe is Head of Media Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.
tkupe@languages.wits.ac.za*



Phil Molefe

Mathatha Tsedu



Continued from page 17

He said: “The continued use in some sections of our media of foreign nationals as experts or commentators on matters affecting the continent entrenches the view that knowledge of scientific, economic and political developments is the exclusive preserve of [the West].”

Molefe cited the repeats of the clashes between the “Xhosa and the Zulu” in the early 1990s, the 1994 Rwanda genocide and “rampant” corruption as typical of the way Africa is covered by the powerful news agencies headquartered in Paris, New York and London.

“What is clearly lacking is context and the proper analysis of the situation,” Molefe argued, adding that the clashes in South Africa were largely stirred by racists who did not want the 1994 elections to take place, the Rwandan genocide had its roots in Belgian and French colonial rule, while all the loot of the corrupt African leaders was kept in banks in Europe and North America.

While the news executives disagreed on what exactly ‘the African story’ is, they both agreed with media studies lecturer Prof Tawana Kupe, from the University of Witwatersrand, who said that it’s time Africans told the great breaking story.

“The ‘Information Revolution’ is changing the world and life as we know it,” Kupe said, and it’s

transforming politics, business, entertainment, education, and the way people communicate and relate to one another.

Kupe is convinced that the African media, obsessed as they are with the purist pursuit of the “Desmond Tutu-bite-dog”-type story, are “guilty of neglecting and mishandling the story of building an African Information Society as part of the Global Information Society”.

“Specifically, they are guilty of neglecting reporting the policy initiatives that are necessary to make an African Information Society possible.”

Kupe has been closely involved in discussions related to the communications initiatives that are laid out in the New Partnership for Africa’s Development. The Nepad initiative is committed to implementing a three-part development plan that includes “bridging the digital divide by investing in Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs)”.

Unfortunately, says Kupe, “despite the fact that of all Africa’s development plans, Nepad is the only plan in which communication technology issues have been factored in”, African media workers have been unwilling or unable to factor that into their news agendas.

So is it possible African media are afflicted with the same cynicism found in their Western equivalents, as Tsedu argues? Is it because Africans have not taken ownership of telling their stories, as Molefe says? Or is