



Homegrown standards

Paul Helmuth is a household name in Namibia. Not many people know his face, but says *Hendrik Bussiek*, most have heard his voice. “Uncle Paul” is the most regular caller on all of Namibia’s radio talk shows – be they conducted in Oshivambo, Oshiharero, English or Afrikaans. And he is not one of those pains in the neck and the bane of all hosts: a man who loves to hear himself speak, full of his own importance. He is an elderly, retired person, blind, and listens to the wireless every day. He takes an interest in a lot of things, is knowledgeable in many aspects of life and can contribute to nearly every topic. He is the quintessential radio listener in Namibia. Which makes

him an ideal candidate to join a group of men and women who came together for two days to discuss and evaluate the state of the media in their country. Among them were a former television star and now university lecturer; a human rights lawyer; a journalist who has worked for private and state media; a leading figure with Women Action for Development; the co-author of a book on media law in Namibia; a cultural activist and a fighter for press freedom. On the invitation of the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Southern African Media Project (FES) and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), four people each from the media field and from wider civil society met at a farm lodge in the countryside to take part in a project which could set an example for the rest of the continent.

There are bookshelves full of studies on the media in Africa, many of them written by scholars from America or Europe. "They fly in and out of our country," said one participant in a similar exercise in Kenya, "have interviews with many of us and then write something – we usually don't take these reports seriously." There are freedom of the press surveys such as the one done annually by the New York-based Freedom House. The data for these surveys are collected from foreign correspondents, from international visitors, from human rights and press freedom organisations and a variety of news media. The criteria are set and the data evaluated at headquarters. And they come up with results such as the one in their most recent report which said that the media in Kenya – a vibrant and diverse lot – is "not free", putting it on a par with countries like The Gambia or Zimbabwe.

In order to arrive at a more accurate picture, FES and MISA decided to start the "African Media Barometer", a self-assessment exercise done by concerned and informed citizens in each particular country according to a number of general, homegrown criteria.

Homegrown criteria? Indeed.

It may not be a widely recognised fact, but the continent has over the past few years established considerable consensus on principles of freedom of expression. Most importantly, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2002 adopted a Declaration on Principles of Freedom of Expression in Africa, which is one of the most progressive documents of its kind worldwide. This was largely inspired by the groundbreaking Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press (1991) and the African Charter on Broadcasting (2001). And the commission is not just a talk shop. It is the authoritative organ of the African Union mandated to interpret the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which is binding for all member states.

The benchmarks used for the African Media Barometer have to a large extent been lifted from this declaration. Forty-two indicators were developed: they measure the realisation of the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the media; the diversity, independence and sustainability of the media landscape; the regulation of broadcasting, including the state of transformation of the state into a public broadcaster; and – of particular importance in a self-assessment exercise – the level of professional standards.

Panels of experts in each country have frank and intensive discussions on a host of pertinent questions: is the right to freedom of expression really practised by their fellow citizens – including journalists – "without fear"; is public information easily accessible; is a wide range of sources of information available and affordable to citizens; is broadcasting regulated by an independent body and is the national broadcaster really accountable to the public (and not the government); do the media follow voluntary codes of professional standards including principles



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of accuracy and fairness? A rapporteur takes detailed notes and compiles the results into a comprehensive report – two days of debate usually produce information and assessments worth weeks of field work by a researcher. Said one panelist during a tea break: "It is as if we are all writing a book together."

One aspect of the exercise that helps to concentrate minds and keeps discussions on track is the scoring. After extensive debate panelists are asked to allocate scores to each of the indicators – in a secret ballot. The scale ranges from a low 1 ("country does not meet indicator") and a medium 3 ("country meets many aspects of indicator but progress may be too recent to judge") to a high of 5 ("country meets all aspects of the indicator and has been doing so over time"). These scores can then be used both as a measurement of development in a given country over time (the plan is to repeat the exercise every two years), as well as to make comparisons between countries.

Up to now, a test run in four countries (Zambia, Namibia, Botswana, Kenya) has been completed. The results of the scoring show that panelists generally took a realistic view – neither attempting to be patriotic and give undue praise, nor being overly critical or cynical. Botswana and Zambia ended up with an equal overall score of 2.2 (countries minimally meet aspects of the indicators), mainly due to the lack of any attempt to reform the broadcasting sector (where both countries scored exactly the same low 1.7).

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Namibia and Kenya both scored 2.7 overall, meaning that these countries "meet many aspects" of the indicators, with relatively high marks for freedom of expression in general for Namibia (3.2) and professional standards for Kenya (3.2).

These results now make for powerful lobbying tools. As all panelists "have clout in their spheres of influence" (in the words of one participant) they can draw on them in helping to shape opinions inside and outside the political arena.

Take Botswana, for example, the much praised "cradle of democracy in Africa". Its dismal score came as no surprise to the panel, who spoke of their country as a "democracy without democrats", where there is "a lot of fear among citizens, partly due to intimidating threats made by state operatives like the police, security officers and the army".

In Zambia, panelists resolved to work urgently towards the repeal of still existing pieces of colonial legislation, such as sedition laws, that impinge on freedom of expression. And in Namibia there was consensus that a defunct Media Council as a self-regulatory mechanism for the media should be urgently revived.

In Southern Africa, now that the test phase is completed, MISA will continue the process. The plan is to apply the barometer in Swaziland, Angola and Mozambique this year, and in the remaining MISA countries in 2006. Similar processes will start in East and West Africa next year. ■