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African Journalism in the  
Information Society

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**Cover picture:** An outdoor church gathering in Mozambique is by *Chris Kirchhoff*. The pictures in this edition from all over Africa were taken by Kirchhoff during his recent visits through Southern Africa, across the Great Lakes Region and into Ethiopia. The pictures from the Highway Africa conference were taken by *Paul Greenway*.

# Who are these Afros who are so pessimistic?



This edition of *Review* takes its theme from the recent Highway Africa conference in Grahamstown, which in turn has been focusing its conferences, research and news agency reporting on the debates emanating from the World Summit on the Information Society processes for the last two years.

The Highway Africa community has been concerned since 2003 that the World Summit processes are so focused on the technology (ie: the “digital divide”) that they forget that the purpose of technology is to enhance our lives with meaningful information (see Modoux’s and Chipari’s comments below).

Information makes no sense without media and media makes no sense without journalism, so along with those in the media and civil society caucuses making this point in the run-up to WSIS 2 in Tunisia, *Review* raises its voice on this issue too.

But for *Review*’s purposes, the debate has sparked some good, hard thinking about what African Journalism is, and could be. And so we bring you some of the most perceptive people watching and analysing media on this continent today, not only in Southern Africa but further afield. I hope you enjoy and are provoked by their insights and ideas.

Much of the material we are carrying came out of the talks and discussions at Highway Africa, and the first session inevitably (with the theme “African Journalism”) had a strong focus on that brand of reporting which has come to be known as “Afro-pessimism”. Christine Qunta, South African lawyer who was a panellist, reminded us of that shameful piece of journalism the Economist carried in May 2000, which called Africa the “hopeless continent” and then went on to detail for four pages what Lars Nord (see page 14) would call an ‘interpretive’ journalism without solid basis in the usual standards that guide news, and a predictive journalism that takes no responsibility for its star-gazing.

It was instructive for me to get in the post both National Geographic and Newsweek while the conference was on. The two front page cover headlines: “Africa: whatever you thought think again”



and “What’s right with Africa” seem to indicate a shift in the way the world’s journalists are reporting this continent. Both sets of reports came from within the continent, visited several countries and looked for nuance and change. They didn’t pontificate from London, based on a world-view that is preset, and assume an entire continent is characterised by one dictator, one war.

So when I heard a conference delegate over tea remark to a fellow attendee: “Who are these Afros who are so pessimistic?” I had to not only laugh at the cleverness but also think what a good motto to adopt. Certainly the conference presenters and the writers for this *Review* are not buying into a passive, hands-wringing anguish, they are doing the hard work of thinking and working through – on multiple levels – how to make the journalism better, more responsive, more attuned. To Africa.

*Anthea Garman*, Editor.

## WSIS 2 and the African media

Speaking at the Highway Africa conference in Grahamstown in September Alain Modoux, Orbicom president, said the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action from WSIS 1 in Geneva was “poor in terms of media”. “There is nothing in the text regarding media except a vague mention of the ‘role of the media’ without specifying what that is.

“This summit [WSIS 2 in Tunis] is coming at the worst time, it will be affected by the atmosphere of the UN General Assembly in New York [meeting to discuss the Millennium Goals] and will probably achieve very little.” However, he said the WSIS process had “triggered a fantastic awareness movement all over the world”. It has been an argument to think about, to organise, to reinforce civil society, to get support and funding, and to teach government delegates what they have been signatories to.”

Media Institute of Southern Africa Executive Director Luckson Chipari agreed that the timing of WSIS 2, just as the UN was having difficult and contentious meetings over



**Luckson Chipari**



**Alain Modoux**

the Millennium Goals, was not good.

He also said that the ITU (the International Telecommunication Union, the world organising body) was so focused on technology, infrastructure and the digital divide issue that it was not engaging seriously with civil society or paying much attention to the founding arrangement of WSIS

which was that governments, the ITU and civil societies organisations were to be equal partners.

“Civil society has, however, focused WSIS on processes and content.”

He said the ITU had to be reminded that Article 19 [of the UN Declaration of Human Rights], communication rights and gender issues were important.

But he also had sharp words for African journalists who were not covering WSIS and focusing on these issues for Africa. Media in Africa need to follow up on their country government’s commitments, track the funding for these and report on key policy markers on ICTs, he said.

## Briefing for African journalists

The Media Institute of Southern Africa and the International Institute of Journalism in Berlin (InWent) are holding a seminar with five experts (two from Africa) on Summit on 15 November from 1 to 3pm in Salle Hammamet at WSIS 2 in Tunis. There is space for 100 journalists.

**Details from**  
director@misa.org  
www.misa.org  
www.inwent.org

The official summit site  
http://www.itu.int/wsif/