

A diploma and YOUR OWN newspaper

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Conakry, Guinea: "Hello, Mme Randle? I am returning your call. I am the publisher of the newspaper..." The caller's greeting took me by surprise. The call wasn't a mistake. Earlier I left a message asking her to call me. I wanted to talk with her about a new programme at her journalism school. It was the way she presented herself that surprised me, referring to herself not as a student but as the *publisher* of a newspaper.

The fact is she is actually both.

Welcome to the future for journalism school graduates – at least as envisioned at L'ISSIC-Kountia (the Institute for Higher Education in Information and Communication) which was created in 2006 and is the first school of journalism at the University of Conakry – a diploma and your own newspaper enterprise. If this model works, it would answer the two burning questions of every graduating university student: "What am I going to do *now*?" and "Will I find a job?"

In 2009, at the initiation and urging of the school administration, a group of third and fourth year L'ISSIC students started their own private newspaper which they named *Le Tonnerre* – the name in English means "thunder" or "roar". It is a bi-monthly publication whose mission is to: "*éclairer toute ambiguïté*" – "*bring clarity to ambiguity*" in news coverage.

It is the first-ever, student-owned private newspaper in Guinea. It is a *real newspaper* – officially licensed and with the objective of competing in the commercial media market – which in Guinea is already very crowded and financially feeble. Its target audience is the general public – not just the university community.

The paper's legally-registered publisher is Mame Fatoumata Diallo, a 20-year-old print journalism major who is in her final year of school. As publisher and editor, Ms Diallo is a first among many firsts as not just the publisher, but editor of this novel venture, but also one of the rare women in print media management.

Nothing like this has ever been tried before in Guinea. L'ISSIC Director Dr Bangaly Camara is very hopeful that it will succeed. In fact, the school wants to institutionalise this effort.

"We're looking at putting into place a mechanism so that each journalism class that enters will create its own publication and they will take this with them when they graduate," he said.

"If they persevere, they could become the grand patrons of the press," he said enthusiastically. "Most of the media in Guinea is owned by families or groups of friends – this is something totally different."

The need for training of qualified media practitioners is very real in Guinea, he stressed. "In order to reinforce the capacity of journalism in Guinea you really have to start with training at the fundamental levels. That is our number one priority at L'ISSIC to develop the capacities of our students."

Employment for the graduates is another real concern that has to be addressed. "We also want our students to be able to find jobs when they leave here." The reality in the media market in Guinea is the same as it is in many places in the world today, he continued, "competition, financial challenges, a scarcity of jobs and certainly no guarantees about employment for journalists – especially new ones entering the field."

Camara sees in *Le Tonnerre* what he hopes will become standard procedure at the L'ISSIC: that this student-owned, private media venture, because it is being produced by students under the supervision of professionals via a school of journalism, they will better journalists and the product produced of a higher quality in the market place.

The idea is that the paper will be a collaborative venture between the journalism and the communication departments, although he acknowledged that the school is very much in the development stages and that there are many needs for both the journalism and communications departments in terms of materials and staffing.

Still, he said, this model will offer students an opportunity to "learn, sharpen their skills, and become, if they want to, entrepreneurs at the same time".

L'ISSIC is not the only institution offering journalism/media training in Guinea. There are at least four private schools (with new ones popping up) offering specialisation and/or degrees in this domain – and thus more candidates in an already crowded market. For Director Camara, this is yet another reason why this model has potential.

Still, when one stops and reflects on some of the recent developments in Guinea-

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Conakry, in particular its recent political and social turmoil, including the brutal attack by the military on opposition political protests in September 2009, it gives one pause.

It certainly is not a place that comes to mind first when one thinks of freedom of the press or even an active media. Nor would it seem that getting a media license would be easy. In fact, this situation is, as they say in Facebook-lingo “complicated”.

Like a myriad countries in Africa where state-owned media was the rule, particularly in French-speaking West Africa, Guinea in the 1990s liberalised its laws to allow private media, that is print media, to operate for the first time since gaining colonial independence (in the case of Guinea, 1958.)

In every country except for Guinea, media liberty was then extended to broadcast, namely private radio. In Guinea, it was only in 2005, after succumbing to internal pressures from civil society groups and external pressures from international donors, government partners, etc., that it legalised private radio, the last country in West Africa to do so. The first licenses were issued in 2006 to three radio stations.

Since that time the number of private radio stations has mushroomed. There has also been an incredible increase in print media numbers, in particular newspapers, despite the country’s dismally low literacy rates.

According to IREX, an organisation that tracks independent media in developing countries, as of 2008, in addition to the state-owned daily newspaper and the country’s only television station, there were approximately 250 newspapers and 25 private radio stations in Guinea.

There is also a growing Internet presence of Guinea news sites both for print and radio outlets that are based in the country and outside it but that target the in-country and its large diaspora populations. While the government still holds the monopoly on television, many people believe those days are numbered.

The Republic of Guinea is a lush, tropical country that is abundantly endowed with natural resources and whose population ranks among the poorest in the world by almost any development measurement.

Still the cost of the media license fee is not out of reach for everyone. The current fee of 50 000 Guinea Francs (GNF) is, given the country’s rampant inflation, the equivalent of approximately \$10 US. Of course there is a process for having application dossiers approved by the various authorities and finally by the CNC, the national communications authorising body.

This flurry of media activity comes at a time when there is growing discussion about media quality, journalism education, and the role each contributes to democracy in Africa from entities such as the World Information Society global forum and the African Development Forum. Unesco has been charged with looking at

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how to help improve and strengthen journalism and communication training institutions on the continent, including the designation of “Centres of Excellence”.

Talk to media owners and editors in Guinea-Conakry and what you’ll hear is how they are not at all impressed by the quality of journalism education being offered as exemplified in the job candidates they encounter.

“Education in Guinea is a real problem, it’s not just journalism education,” said Souleymane Diallo, the veteran journalist and media-human rights activist, who in 1992 founded *Le Lynx*, one of the first private, satirical newspapers and which is still one of the most widely read and regarded in the country.

“There are not enough trainers, that is, not enough trained educators to offer the training that students need in these schools so at the foundation level, the base these potential journalists receive is not solid,” said Ibrahima Diallo, director general of Liberté FM, a popular radio station.

“I don’t work with journalism schools,” said Kabasan Keita, owner of Radio Soleil-FM. “Very few of my journalists have formal training – I prefer it that way because what I find with those coming with diplomas is I have to end up training them anyway.”

“There’s definitely a need for training for those who work on the business side of the media,” added Astou Ndiaye, the marketing director for Radio Djugui-FM.

For *Le Tonnerre* editor-publisher Mame Fatoumata Diallo, owning her own newspaper or even being a print journalist was not her intention when she came to L’ISSIC in 2006. Hers will be the school’s first four-year graduating class.

“My dream was always to be on television,” she said. “Here in Guinea we grew up with the idea that to be a *journalist* you had to be on TV.” She said she loved watching the women who came across the screen of the national RTG (Radio-Television Guinea). She recalled some of the names: “Manciné Camara, Marie Louise Sanoussy, and Youmssa Sidimé – I said to myself, ‘when I grow up, I want to be just like them’.”

At L’ISSIC she was introduced to print journalism. As part of their course work the students were exposed to media outlets such as *Horoya*, the state-owned newspaper, and also government ministries where they saw the different types of communication media and, she said, she began to change her focus. “I’ve always liked writing ... I started to think that maybe this was the field for me and that I could be good at it.”

Le Tonnerre is not the only paper produced by University of Conakry students.

There is also *Le Campus Express*, which is the official university campus-wide paper. It appears infrequently and it actually was the catalyst for their student venture, she said. During her third year of school the students were instructed to produce some stories for *Le Campus Express*, which they did but, to their disappointment the issue was never published.

“During our summer school vacation some friends and I got together and we started talking about starting our own newspaper.”

When they returned to school, they took the idea to their department chair and to their surprise, he told them this was exactly what the school was thinking it wanted students to do. The paper’s name was selected by consensus; they pooled their resources to come up with the license fee and she was selected to submit the registration request in her name – thus she owns this publication and she can take it with her when she graduates.

Ms Diallo insists that they work independently in terms of story selection and content although they consult with their advisor, who is also the head of the print journalism department and they show the final copy prior to printing to the school director.

So what do the students in Guinea-Conakry write about when given access to printer’s ink and a public forum? Well, it turns out, the same thing that the adult-owned publications do. In fact, if it were not for the editorial on the front page identifying the paper’s owners as students at L’ISSIC, no one could tell it apart from the others.

It is, like most papers, a bi-monthly. The cost is the same as most, 2 000 GNF, and the front page and inside content is practically the same, that is, all about politics and political-related happenings, mostly personalities.

“Well, in Guinea, if you’re in the newspaper business and you don’t talk about politics no one is going to pay attention to you,” Diallo said when asked about this content, even as she noted that “most people in Guinea don’t read newspapers – you’re really writing for a very small audience – and, as we get more established we do plan to do more coverage about things like entertainment and sports.”

Diallo is hopeful even though right now its print run is meager – 500 copies, but under 1 000 is the norm for most of the papers published. It has published two issues but is not yet meeting its bi-monthly deadline, just like most of its more established market competitors.

“I think we’ll make it,” she said with confidence. “There was such good feeling among us doing this. It was hard but we had fun. And once the first issue came out, we saw what we’d accomplished.”

“Our biggest worry as students was finding a job after university. Now we’ll always have work. I hope we do inspire other students at L’ISSIC to do the same. It’s hard work but it’s worth it.”

With her university days soon ending, she is confident about her future. “In terms of my dreams – well, I’ve achieved one already with *Le Tonnerre*. I never would have believed that I would one day have my own newspaper in Guinea. I’d like to have a radio station someday, and why not a TV station. In fact, I want to see women everywhere.

I would like to see a woman as president in this country someday.”

