

Too fast too furious

By Theresa Swinton

In less than 10 years, rapid advances in information and communication technologies have enabled journalists to send their stories from anywhere in the world ahead of the competition. Speed journalism means transmitting 90-second to two-minute footage as quickly as possible after it has been filmed, using digital equipment which has become increasingly smaller and more compact.

For freelance journalist and former producer for Associated Press TV, Sahm Venter, the war coverage of Iraq is a prime example of the way that television journalism will be mapped out in the future. In the 1991 Gulf War, television footage was revolutionised by the introduction of the satellite phone for live audio. The 2003 Iraq war introduced the Swe-DISH, a \$200 000 satellite news gathering unit which folds up into a bag the size of aeroplane hand luggage and can be set up in three and a half minutes. A camera and microphone is plugged into this system, enabling journalists to edit footage and transmit audio and video.

"The future of television journalism is live, with no thought for policies around ethics and quality. Television news is becoming a voyeuristic operation for audiences," said Venter. But how does this form of journalism impact on Africa and the African contribution to the global media market?

"When the SABC discussed covering the war in Iraq we wanted to assure the audience that they could access many views from a variety of sources," said head of TV Jimi Matthews. "The international agencies gave a sanitised version of the war. The SABC went into Afghanistan months before the invasion and reported the human stories. We wanted to make the audience realise that the 'collateral damage' that the other stations were referring to, were women and children, people."

This time, the SABC felt that it would be problematic to rely solely on CNN or BBC, especially with their use of embedded journalists.

"Independence was sacrificed. Everything which was transmitted had to be vetted by the army unit that the journalists were embedded with," said Matthews.

The reliance of television agencies on ICTs to

transmit live footage is resulting in Africa being left behind in the global media.

In a study conducted by Glasgow University's Media Group, it was found that Africa was the least covered continent in the year 2000 with only a small percentage of stories despite the fact that millions of people had died in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that year. The greatest amount of coverage given by media organisations was to stories which were located within the country the journalists were situated in.

"African journalists who work for international agencies have to get permission to do certain stories, and if a bigger story comes up then the African story is thrown out," said Venter.

African journalists working for international agencies do not receive the same standard of ICT equipment or training, and when they do receive equipment it is 'loaned' to them.

Television journalism in Africa relies almost exclusively on news footage produced and distributed by Reuters Television (RTV) and Associated Press Television News (APTN). The competitive environment in which these agencies operate translates the news into a commodity not a public service. As a commodity, policies of ethics and content quality have been passed over and with the increasing development of ICTs, there is little attempt by television agency managements to develop guidelines around their use.

"The quality of television journalism is deteriorating and it is up to the owners to ensure that proper journalistic practices are adhered to. At the moment they are not doing this," said Matthews. "The audience also has a responsibility though. If the audience criticised the poor quality of content, then perhaps media agencies would have to rethink their strategy."

"With the emphasis being placed on speed rather than quality, the agencies are ignoring ethics and are letting market relations rule. Reliability, accuracy, balance, fairness, integrity and independence are being ignored because television news is market and competition driven," said Venter.

