



Context Media

By Sim Kyazze

A famous journalism adage is that “the story is in the details”.

For the world Information Society, those details might be in the mind-blowing technological advances in recent years and the dizzying alternative news sources; and in the increased novelty in story telling.

But for the African continent, the story is in the details of the content; and specifically, in how that content is being told.

African academics, news purveyors and media executives have all lately been focused on how the African story is being told, since content is as much a part of the Information Society as the technology advances.

The various interested parties are, however, not agreed on how ‘the African story’ should be told.

At the seventh Highway Africa Conference in Grahamstown, South Africa in September, Mathatha Tsedu, who is Interim Chair of the Africa Editor’s Forum and Editor of the Sunday Times, asserted that foreigners and Africans alike see the same Africa: children eating the cooked hearts of their victims in Liberia, failed democratic experiments, internecine civil strife and a parasitic elite wallowing in excess while their citizens die from infirmity and the effects of war.

“Are we responsible for that as editors?” Tsedu asked. “Yes and no. We are the people who make the decisions, but we are also not responsible,” he said.

“We didn’t start the wars in Liberia, DRC, Burundi or Sierra Leone. We did not create the perma-

nent state of un-democrat-ness of Swaziland where the King is a law unto himself.”

Tsedu then poked fun at traditional news values by saying he would love to get his hands on a story that retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu had bitten a dog, preferably on a Saturday afternoon, in time for his Sunday paper deadline!

“We should get out of this fantasy world and get into the real world,” he said.

The big discussion point then became why should ‘the African story’ be reduced to the simplistic paradigm of “what is news?”. Should African journalists continue to do the West a big favour by reinforcing all the prejudices they harbour about Africa?

Phil Molefe, head of TV channel SABC Africa, doesn’t think so. Molefe is charged with using SABC’s continent-wide reach to collect and disseminate all the African stories that are fresh and useful.

As the South African public broadcaster, the SABC has to work within the broader parameters set by a proactive South African government which is committed to engaging the rest of the continent, especially through newly created bodies like the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad).

“The West’s view of Africa is that of a continent afflicted by famine, poverty, diseases and corruption,” Molefe said. “Absolutely nothing to celebrate Africa’s successes and rich history.”

The SABC executive is convinced that part of the reason African stories are so dismal is because they are often not told by Africans.

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The stories in the details

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!

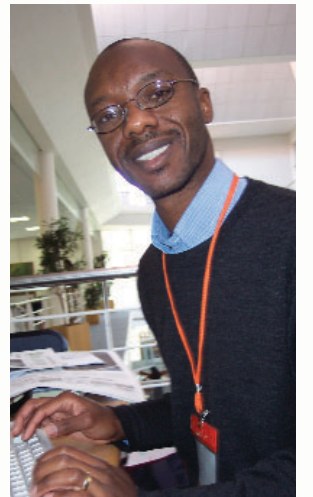
There is lack of in-depth knowledge among journalists and editors about information technologies.

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.

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Phil Molefe

Mathatha Tsedu



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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

Who is going to tell the stories?



Roland Stanbridge, Director of the MA in Global Journalism at Orebro University in Sweden, has just completed a research project into how African media is documenting the use of ICTs on the continent.

The study, "African Media and ICT4D: Documentary Evidence", was commissioned by the Economic Commission for Africa and covered Cameroon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, Rwanda and Senegal and is co-authored by research assistant Maria Ljunggren.

Stanbridge says: "We collected everything produced in these countries on ICTs. The most startling finding was that of all the material produced, 60% came from Egypt."

But what also emerged from the reportage of ICTs is that the stories are urban-focused, event-driven and lacking in debate and criticism.

The voice of ordinary people is almost totally missing, with presidents and CEOs being the visible speakers on information technology issues.

Generally editors of media organisations are quite ignorant on ICT matters (only one editor questioned in the entire study knew what the "African Information Society" was).

Training colleges around the continent are not adequately teaching the use of ICTs, either.

Stanbridge said: "Committed and knowledgeable journalists are very few. Who is going to tell the people of Africa the ICT story of Africa?"

"African Media and ICT4D: Documentary Evidence" is available from Mercy Wambui at mwambui@uneca.org

it possible that the African media might simply be out of depth when it comes to this brave new ICT world, as Kupe argues?

Roland Stanbridge of Stockholm University has just concluded a study for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) whose statistics are shocking, except that they should not be, coming as they do, from a continent that is dead last in almost every category of human endeavour.

Stanbridge's team monitored nine African countries on media coverage of the Internet over a two-month period earlier this year, and discovered that out of 1 000 stories, only one mentioned the WSIS, just two mentioned the phrase "ICT", and a solitary story quoted an average individual who was neither an expert, a bureaucrat or a politician and tried to see how that person was interacting with the Information Society.

Statistics don't lie, as the saying goes, so there is evidently a lot of work to be done to bring all the thinking around 'the African story' onto the same page.

There are certainly signs that some news executives are beginning to warm up to the challenge. Tsedu's Sunday Times used to have bureaux in London and New York, but has closed them to open up in Nairobi and Lagos. Similarly, SABC Africa has opened two bureaux in Harare and Nairobi, and has also signed information share agreements with national broadcasters in Rwanda and Egypt.



In East Africa, the Nation Media Group, with flagship titles, radio and television in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, recently launched a syndication service, and hopes to sell content to all takers around the continent.

These are baby steps still, but at least there are initiatives to have Africans tell the African story. The Nepad initiative shows that Africans could dream big, even on ICTs.

Now it's time to see whether there is a story in the details.