Under-reported and misreported

by Wilfred Kiboro

At a recent meeting of the International Press Institute attended by delegates from 55 countries, the reporting of Africa was given special attention.

Five major issues were discussed:

1. Africa is under-reported and misreported – often in very negative terms.
2. The media in Africa are as much to blame for the bad image in the eyes of the world as the international media.
3. African media don't link their reporting to the issues facing Africa, for example the image created of Africa has a direct link with foreign investment in Africa.
4. Press freedom issues are on the back burner in Africa.
5. African journalists have abdicated the responsibility to be part and parcel of opinion shaping in Africa, and instead are cheerleaders for government and the political class.

Misreporting is key in the poor image of Africa as underdeveloped, poor, corrupt, hungry, illiterate, hopeless and "nothing works". It is our duty as Africans to do something about that. Africa is home to a billion people and has huge resources – this is not taken seriously in journalism. Very often one country's ills are taken as representative of the whole continent. Why is this? Lack of information? Is it the reporting? Africa is often buried in the rubble of the failed states. The foreign media constantly use the stereotypes of Bokassa, Mobutu Sese Seko.

How long do we have to live under that cloud? What should we do about their history and legacy? Many of them were dead before most Africans alive today were born! We are now in the digital age, for heaven's sake! We are caught in the vicious cycle of the negative under the pretext of entertainment.

We do not have any media outlet which talks in depth and intelligently about Africa.

I am offering to put together editors from across Africa to meet and talk about this. I want to suggest that the media in Africa needs to move from a community to a social and economic role.

What do we need to do to put Africa back on the agenda and to bring to account those flouting media freedom?

Language is culture

*Linguistic diversity on the Internet is becoming a reality says **Vanessa Malila**, but how many African languages are represented in that diversity?*

"The future looks good for web multilingualism."

Many of us think that English dominates the web pages we surf each day. Indeed, until recently English was the predominant language for publishing online, but things are slowly changing and the presence of linguistic diversity on the Internet is starting to become a reality in the global village. The question, however, remains: how many African languages are represented in that diversity?

"Our language is our culture" and for many people the Internet is inaccessible because those words written on the millions of web pages and websites are unfamiliar and strange. Let's disregard the fact that millions don't have access to the Internet or the fact that many are illiterate, and simply examine language and, therefore, culture, online.

During the 1990s it was estimated that almost 80% of the Internet was dominated by English. Even today, the terms used to identify this sphere are English-born and American-led: "world wide web", "Internet" and the language or script on which the Internet is built (American Standard Code of Information Interchange – ASCII) are all English-centered.

As we become a more globalised society, and boundaries are no longer defined by geography, language becomes a boundary and marker, an identifier of who we are (rather than where we are). While the Internet is able to break physical geographic boundaries of location, it has and still is entrenching many of the boundaries imposed historically on non-English speaking communities. As Gasnet notes in David Crystal's book *English as a Global Language* (1997):

"It is incredible when I hear people talking about how open the web is. It is the ultimate act of intellectual colonialism. The product comes from America so we either must adapt to English or stop using it. That is the right of any business. But if you are talking about a technology that is supposed to open the world to hundreds of millions of people you are joking. This just makes the world into new sorts of haves and have-nots."

So where does this leave the millions of non-English speakers (or readers) who use the Internet daily? Well, the picture is changing as more linguistically-diverse individuals discover the power of publishing online, and businesses, the media, governments and civil society begin to understand the power and value of informing their communities in their indigenous languages.

Today, close to 70% of Internet users are non-English speakers and the percentage of non-English material online is quickly growing.

Crystal (a linguistics professor) acknowledges that "the web is increasingly reflecting the distribution of language presence in the real world, and many sites provide the evidence. They range from individual businesses doing their best to present a multilingual identity to big sites collecting data on many languages".

There are many examples of communities representing their cultural and linguistic diversity online by publishing in their indigenous languages. In Japan for example, it was estimated in 2001 that 90% of web pages were in Japanese (this figure could easily have grown since then).

While English users represent the single biggest language group online, they are only a fraction of the (approximately) 812 million users. In fact, English is spoken by only about a quarter of all Internet users.

In a study done by Internet World Stats it was found that the top 10 languages spoken by users are: English, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, German, French, Korean, Italian, Portuguese and Dutch.

Today it is easy to find millions of websites in any of these 10 languages, and some accommodating more than one. Many online non-English newspapers offer readers a version in their local language as well as an alternative for English speakers.

As Crystal says, "the future looks good for web multilingualism".

So why do we as Africans feel that English is still ruling the roost? Because, while it may not be the only language dominant on the Internet today, most of those top 10 languages are still foreign to the

African news agencies

Allafrica.com
allAfrica.com posts over 1 000 stories daily in English and French and offers multilingual streaming programming as well as 900 000 articles in a searchable archive. Registered in Mauritius, with offices in Johannesburg, Dakar, Lagos and Washington DC, subscriptions cost $95 a year with unlimited access to AllAfrica's archive, the search engine and the option to choose from 15 categories of daily, customised email alerts of top news.

GEM
The Gender Links Gender and Media Opinion and Commentary Service (GEM Service) provides mainstream media with fresh perspectives on the news that affects the everyday lives of women and men in Africa. The GEM Service targets the opinion and commentary pages of mainstream newspapers, radio stations and wire services in Southern Africa, East Africa and globally through Gender Links' partnership with the African Women and Child Feature Service in Nairobi, and Inter Press Service, a global development news agency. It provides on average 10 articles each month from writers across Africa.
Contact Janine Moolman at janinegenderlnks.org.za

HANA
The Highway Africa News Agency is an event-based news dissemination service. It began life in December 2003 at the first WSIS in Geneva with a team of 18 African journalists. Since then HANA has covered the Africa Telecoms Summit in Cairo in May 2004, the WSIS 1st precom in Tunisia in June 2004, the Highway Africa conference in Grahamstown in September 2004, the Icann general assembly in December 2004, the WSIS Africa regional meeting in Accra in February and the 2nd WSIS precom in Geneva in February. The team will definitely be at WSIS 2 in Tunis in November. HANA has generated more than 250 stories for 162 email subscribers through the website http://www.highwayafrica.ru.ac.za/hana/indx.asp. HANA also serves as a platform to train journalists in the use and knowledge of ICTs.

Health-e
Health-e is a news agency that produces news and in-depth analysis for the print and electronic media. Its particular focus is HIV/Aids, public health and issues regarding health policy and practice in South Africa. The agency provides print features for newspapers and magazines and broadcast packages for national and community radio stations. They also accept commissions.
http://www.health-e.org.za/about_us/index.php

IPS
From its headquarters in Johannesburg, Inter Press Service Africa co-ordinates a network of correspondents and stringers in more than 30 African countries. This network of journalists provides news features and analyses from their own countries. The editorial staff places emphasis not only on hearing the voices of those in positions of power and formal authority, but on providing access for actors in civil society and the majority of the people whose voices have often been silent in the media. The offerings include the website www.ipsnews.net/africa/index.asp, *Terra Viva Africa* – a weekly journal, the *Gender Bulletin* every fortnight and *Focus on Southern Africa*, a bi-weekly e-letter. Regional Director, Africa: Farai Samhungu at farai@ips.org

IRIN
IRIN Networks is a humanitarian news agency

Chris Kirchhoff

African continent, and our cultural and linguistic diversity is not being represented online.

It's easy for languages spoken in developed countries to find a strong presence on the Internet. As businesses, and governments from developed, non-English speaking countries and communities find a stronghold online and a mass of local users, so they begin to switch from publishing in English to publishing in their local languages.

"Access to the Internet is continually broadening to encapsulate speakers of languages other than English, hence empowering these languages as well," note Kaschula and De Vries in a study on the use of Afrikaans online.

Not enough Africans have access to the Internet to create demand for indigenous languages online and of those that are connected, only a small portion are empowered to publish in their local languages.

Until African Internet users begin to demand multilingualism in its absolute form (and not in its current restricted form which accommodates only a small percentage of the hundreds of languages spoken in the world), we will continue to regard the Internet as English-dominated and Western/Eurocentric.

It is not, however, all doom and gloom and as with many things, the media are leading the way in African language publishing online.

Very often examples of non-English websites are those of online media or news organisations. Even in South Africa, the first Zulu website was the online version of South Africa's Zulu newspaper: *Isolezwe*. As Kaschula and De Vries note, "…it is in the realm of news that there has been a recent flourishing of

the use of languages other than English… This is also true of Afrikaans speakers who have online access to Afrikaans newspapers from anywhere in the world".

There are also electronic versions of newspapers from Malaysia, Indonesia, Colombia, Turkey, Qatar and about 80 other nations.

African media are a means of allowing for a truly diverse and multilingual Internet by pioneering African-language publishing online and creating the way for government, business, individuals and communities to share their cultures while maintaining their cultural and linguistic integrity and uniqueness.

This means Africans can make a space of their own on the Internet, with material that is culturally, linguistically and practically relevant to them, and also begin to strengthen their cultural and linguistic ties by accessing local language material online. ■

"African media are a means for a truly diverse and multilingual Internet."

covering sub-Saharan Africa. IRIN products include a news services and local radio services and are provided free-of-charge, available in a range of forms, including analytical reports, fact sheets, interviews, daily country updates and weekly summaries in English, French and Kiswahili. These products are available through the IRIN website at www.IRINnews.org and an email distribution service. A growing list of additional products, web specials, audio-visual presentations are also available, including maps, graphics and photographs. Pat Banks, IRIN Co-ordinator, Nairobi irin@ocha.unon.org, or contact subs@ocha.unon.org.

Japan
Zimbabwean journalist Roderick Blackman Ngoro, who has worked in South Africa and Japan, has set up a news agency to supply Japanese media with information from Africa. Ngoro has met with news managers and editors and the Foreign

Correspondents Club of Japan to discuss the need to broaden the perspective of and interest in African issues by Japanese media. African ambassadors in Tokyo have supported this initiative.

The website is an attempt to raise the newsworthy level of "Africa" in local Japanese media. The online news agency will be a "small independent news organisation to be run by a two- or three-person news team" providing its own interpretation of African news and issues, and which would field press queries from the Japanese press.

Japanese news media are only represented in Johannesburg, Cairo and Nairobi. Ngoro can be contacted at garikaim@yahoo.co.uk

PANA
With an expanding pool of correspondents continent wide and partnerships with 48 national news agencies, the Panafrican News Agency has the largest news-gathering operation in Africa. It offers:

● Environment Bulletin (Monday) regular update on environmental developments across the continent.
● Economic and Development Bulletin (Tuesday). Stock market performance, commodity prices and production, national debts, trade and investment. Africa's economies are among the fastest growing in the world, attracting new interest from investors and traders worldwide.
● Science and Health Bulletin (Wednesday). From Aids to Ebola, Africa is in the news. But there are many exciting breakthroughs that don't grab headlines, this bulletin gives updates of scientific and medical research, health delivery issues and technological change.
● Africa Press Review (Friday). This weekly survey examines reporting and commentary from a cross section of African periodicals.
email: quoiset@sonatel.senet.net

Panos
Panos London works with journalists in developing countries to produce news, features and analysis about the most critical global issues of today. The website is a source of high quality, independent information. Panos produces material for journalists to use to write their own articles − see Panos Reports and Panos Books − as well as publishing a free monthly package of in-depth articles on issues that matter to people living in developing countries − see Panos Features. Panos pictures is an independent photo agency representing photojournalists worldwide who document issues and geographic areas that are under-reported, misrepresented or ignored. Radio is not excluded from their concerns, see www.interworldradio.net for a selection of Panos programming. www.panos.org.uk/index.asp or contact Mark Covey, External Relations Unit, email info@panos.org.uk