

by Maimouna Mills

If it weren't for former US Vice-President Al Gore or my Senegalese cousin who claims to have invented the Internet, I wouldn't know that SA's former Vice President Zuma was charged with rape, that Nigerian Vice President Atiku was about to be evicted from his party, that former Prime Minister Seck was still in jail in Senegal. Yet, these and a host of untold stories are shaping and defining the history of our continent, the lives of our people.

I wouldn't know any of that because from where I stand – or sit – (in Washington DC) there is absolutely no network which encapsulates the richness, the diversity, the amazing evolution and revolutions and the trials, miseries and triumphs of Africa. If I were to sit or stand on African shores, I could get more information, bits and pieces of it, that is, culling different sources. But I couldn't, with a click of a button, and within half an hour (as I could on CNN, the BBC or Al Jazeera), get constant updates of news across this vast motherland.

And yet, since the heady days of Amadou Mactar Mbow at the helm of Unesco, Africans have dreamt, debated, devised and attempted to implement a New World Information Order. A brave new world which would end the Western monopoly on information gathering and distribution, a brave new world in which the news would no longer be filtered in the North and trickle back to the South, a brave new world in which Africans would tell their stories, frame them with their own voices, their own lenses, their own sensitivities, their own experiences and their own knowledge.

At a time when the concept of globalisation is expanding without defined parameters, this decades' long struggle should not be viewed as African militant fervour. It should be reaffirmed with a keen understanding of the same political and economic consequences of the ever-growing power of the media. I always like to tell people in Washington – and frankly anyone who cares to listen – that Africa is the last frontier when it comes to economic development, business and investments. On average, Africa yields 46% return on investment. With all the real and exaggerated risks of doing business in Nigeria – the stock exchange there (I did a story on the floor of the Lagos Stock Exchange and an interview with its head in 2002) at that time yielded more than a 120% return. And its director general is a woman, I think only one of three in the world. For African people in the diaspora who are either seeking to return home, invest back, lure investors, serve as advisors to Western firms or as lobbyists for African governments, these stories are news to share. These are trumpets to be blown around the continent. These will help debunk the myths of the hopeless continent, the heart of darkness, the proverbial black hole. It will restore the confidence of not just foreign investors, but of the throngs of African investors, bankers, equity analysts, economists,

# Blowing a trumpet

lawyers, doctors, scientists and engineers who work and live outside Africa, but want to go back or at least contribute to the continent's progress from wherever they are.

Concerning the latter groups – scientists and engineers – again in 2002, when researching a story on reversing the brain drain, I came across a *Financial Times* article which stated that there are more African scientists and engineers working in Western countries than in Africa. Not only do they work, they excel. Examples abound like that of Malian Modibo Keita at Nasa. And they have stories to tell, expertise to share.

Before coming to Nairobi, I spoke to a number of Africans in the United States about the concept of an African Television Network. They were unanimous in applauding the initiative, supporting it and yearning to share their knowledge-based skills with the vast audience which the network would provide. Economists at the World Bank and the IMF want to explain macro-economic policies and structural adjustment reforms. Agricultural and rural experts want to develop the rationale for boreholes, catchment areas, dams and agricultural extension projects. High-level diplomats at the UN Department of Political Affairs want to shed light on MONUC operations in Congo and the UN's overall engagement just a few months before historic elections in the DRC. They all understand that such a platform doesn't come cheap. It necessitates political will, but without political interference from our governments. It necessitates corporate engagement and commitment, but without corporations dictating content or withdrawing support at whim. It necessitates openness and constructive, healthy dialogues with the journalists when the story is fully told, all aspects covered, even those which are not flattering to the individual profiled or the institution represented.

They understand, Africa and Africans need a new paradigm in journalism. One totally devoid of sensationalism and parachute reporting but also one freed of polyannish idealism and romanticism. They understand, and I hope the new network will fully and immediately embrace the new technologies so that whether they are travelling in Africa, or sitting in their offices or homes in Washington, New York, Atlanta or Los Angeles, they can watch, access comprehensive news, factual data, stock quotes, newsmakers interviews and all of the trustworthy and convincing information to be featured in our new network.

On the purely political level, Africa has had more than 50 democratic elections in the last four years – these were

## A24

In March and April, an informal steering committee – a group of interested people and organisations – met in London to establish a framework for fundraising and interim steps to establish a TV channel to be called A24. Now, a legal entity (A24 Media) needs to be established as an off-shore company based in Mauritius so that it can raise money.

Committee member Salim Amin says A24 has been approached by at least two companies to start producing reports for satellite or Internet distribution. To ensure that the momentum of the project is not lost, A24 is thinking of training journalists and beginning with small-scale productions so that it can generate television material and cash flow. "The goal is to raise substantial funds based on a viable and realistic plan to create a pan-African, multi-platform news and information channel."

possible in part because African people are more engaged in their civic duties; they stay alert and informed, they are tuned to what unfolds in other countries, and they understand the power of their vote. The African diaspora is keenly aware that political stability is the beacon for progress and opportunities, that beyond the "negative image", political repression touches each and every aspect of their lives, even if they are thousands of miles away. The recent separate demonstrations in Washington by thousands of members of the Ethiopian and Gambian diaspora exemplify a number of things, among which the power of information and the Internet, which enabled them to remain connected to events on the ground, their commitment to impact those events, and the realisation that even when you are called Ethiopian-American or Gambian-American and your kids barely speak Amharic or Ouoloff, images of riots, beatings and detentions in your homeland elicit the same reactions as in those who never left Addis or Banjul.

Let's just imagine the full, comprehensive coverage the African Television Network would have given to those who were beaten and in jail, those who marched to defend them, and those who decided the course of action. ■

*This speech was given to the ATV Forum in Nairobi in December.*

