



East meets South

Nepad and the continent's leader's stated intention to engage across the political, social and economic landscape have set the scene for African media owners to communicate. Sandra Gordon considers whether there is real value in doing so.

Cocooned for so long from the economic realities of other African countries, locally-based media owners were slow to venture into the rest of the continent. However, with encouragement from our government, over the past five years we have witnessed major media players begin a journey of exploration and development. Despite the challenges of doing business across our borders there is growing realisation that South African media owners can and should look to the rest of Africa for growth and that, arguably, we have an obligation to share our knowledge and experience.

There are a multitude of examples that reflect the willingness of local companies to experiment, albeit cautiously. The SABC and Multichoice have extended their broadcast platforms across the continent and it is clear that these are long term initiatives and that, at this point, their objectives may well be politically, rather than economically, driven. Another media type that has moved into the rest of South and East Africa with alacrity is outdoor billboards. The local market is dominated by Clear Channel and Primedia and both have aggressively gone in where other more traditional media have feared to venture. Johnnic Communications has launched *Business Day* in Nigeria, Media 24 has extended their *Drum* and *True Love* brands into Kenya and Nigeria and e.tv is looking to partner with their counterparts in television and radio with e.tv and the Yfm youth radio concept. We can expect continued activity despite the fact that in most cases profits are yet to flow.

The African expansion challenges facing South African media owners include poor infrastructure, restrictive legislation, concentrated ownership structures, politically-motivated interference, unstable political structures and a lack of press freedom. Under these circumstances brave media owners with big budgets and perhaps a socio/political agenda will pave the way, while the more cautious will follow when there are successful media case studies to imitate.

However, the dissemination of knowledge is an area that South African media companies, both big and small, are paying attention to. They are generous with their time and keen to explore opportunities as they pass on their expertise.

The best example is an initiative of the Sol Plaatje Media Leadership Institute (an associate of the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (a German-based foundation that promotes the work of media practitioners). For the past three years they have organised an annual get together of media practitioners and in April this year invited me to speak on the importance of branding in print media.

It was generally acknowledged that this year's congress "East meets South: strategic challenges for African Media", was the most successful so far. In part this was due to being in the surprisingly (to South Africans) sophisticated and friendly city of Nairobi, but most significantly to the calibre of the delegates and their positive approach.

A cross section of delegates, including media owners, editors and journalists enjoyed two days of discussion and debate. In addition we had time to establish relationships that have endured and developed over the past three months.

The papers presented were above reproach – interesting, enlightening and thought-provoking. However it was the networking among the 31 attendees that really added that extra bit of value. To learn of the difficulties experienced by fellow journalists, editors and media management in the region both impressed and alarmed me.

I was impressed by the Nation Group – they control a television station, newspapers and a radio station, are owned by the Aga Khan and publish the most profitable daily in the world. We heard of new ventures in Uganda – a new tabloid, *The Red Pepper*, that makes *Die Son* and *Daily Voice* look tame – and was amazed at the fortitude of media owners in Malawi (healthy and growing newspaper and radio station run by entrepreneurs), Mozambique (*Savanna* – a brave tabloid filled with objective reporting) Botswana (flourishing daily newspaper) and Zambia (a mining magazine owned and run by a woman).

What alarmed me? The dire circumstances under which some of them operate. As I write, there are journalists in detention, the bulk of them from Eritrea and Ethiopia. Some two weeks before we arrived in Kenya, the offices of the Standard Group in Nairobi were visited by government representatives who trashed their printing presses and a broadcast unit. A presenter from another country was afraid to answer questions about the media landscape in which her company operates – in this case not fearful of politicians, but of her bosses who control every stitch of their media environment. A Swazi national cannot get funding for a comic magazine, *Super Buddies*, aimed at educating children about HIV/Aids – this despite having the highest incidence of the disease in Africa; there is apathy and chauvinism in this conservative kingdom.

Every couple of months there are hair-raising stories of intimidation of media owners and their staff and while South Africa has a constitution and courts of law that provide comfort, the bulk of our African neighbours do not.

At the close of the congress delegates prepared a statement calling for freedom of the press. While the South African attendees were comfortable with the suggestion that we append our names to the document, other delegates were not. They contemplated the reaction of their governments and media owners back home and shied away. Reminded me of the old days in South Africa.

So perhaps this is what all African media participants have to share that has the most value – our collective experience of how to operate under dire circumstances and to succeed against insurmountable odds.

The South Africans gave many of the other delegates hope and in some cases established warm and worthwhile contacts that will flourish over time and, who knows, may result in good business. ■