

Twenty Ten

African journalism education in a year of radical attention

Dominique le Roux

“African narratives in the west, they proliferate. I really don't care anymore. I'm more interested in the stories we tell about ourselves.”

These are the words of Nigerian writer Chris Abani in a 2007 talk he delivered for TED (www.ted.com), that educative, inspiring web-based nonprofit devoted to “ideas worth spreading”. Africa Media Online and the project known as Twenty Ten are both all about that very same thing: Africans telling Africa's stories.

Twenty Ten – or, to give it its full name, “Twenty Ten: African Media on the Road to 2010 (and beyond)” – is funded by the Dutch Postcode Lottery. It is an initiative of World Press Photo, Free Voice, Africa Media Online and Ikaalmondiaal, and is dedicated to using the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa – a time when a vast global audience is focused on our continent – as a catalyst to tell stories from an African perspective. The project involves African journalists from 34 nations who create written articles, photographs, broadcasts and multimedia productions.

After a call to participation in the five major trade languages of Africa (Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Swahili), we've trained 128 African journalists – all working professionals – in four disciplines (text, radio, photo and multimedia) with an initial online training programme and then with workshops in six African countries (Ghana, Egypt, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, South Africa and Zambia).

These journalists had to fulfil the requirements of the online refresher course and the out-of-country workshop and then deliver three assignments, mentored by tutors with extensive working experience – old journalism hands now turned to teaching. (A video of our final multimedia workshop in Zambia can be viewed at: <http://media.blogs.africamediaonline.com/2010/05/07/twenty-ten-give-boost-to-african-multimedia-journalism/>)

The training and mentoring obviously differed for the four disciplines, with the radio and print being provided by the Reuters Foundation, and the

photography and multimedia through partners of World Press Photo.

I think that, were we to do it all over again, we would place far more emphasis on the briefing of the tutors, both in the expectations of the project as well as the nitty gritty of technical detail in terms of how the material would be uploaded to and distributed by Africa Media Online.

I found myself in fascinating debates at the dinner table, for example, with a print and a radio journalist who were both trainers in the Burkina Faso workshop. The radio journalist was adamant about certain ethics – he deemed it an absolute sin, for example, for us to even contemplate asking the journalists to report on a match from the stand, particularly since the bulk of them were not FIFA accredited.

The print trainer (whose name and agency shall remain undisclosed!) cited some significant sporting events that he had covered for an international news agency by merely watching it on television. I would have liked to have seen more of this type of debate take place in advance, so that we could all be singing off the same song sheet, as it were, in the actual training.

Additionally that age-old coaching issue came up: each of the trainers had impressive CVs and extensive work experience around the globe. However, not all were necessarily brilliant mentors. And all differed in their understanding of the role they should play in the production of the assignments the journalists had to deliver.

Some, for example, coached and edited very closely, which meant that the initial assignments by the journalists in their charge were very strong, but later the quality delivered by the same journalists dropped significantly, once the tutors were no longer involved.

From an education perspective, this is simply an interesting observation. But for Africa Media Online, responsible for delivering that content to a waiting audience around the globe, the impact was substantial. We had made a very simple

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THE LOVE OF FOOTBALL

Amos Gumulira

Helen Teye, a loyal member of the Ghana Female Supporters Union, is a lot more than just another football fan. Not only does she fervently support her local team, Accra Hearts of Oak, and her national team, Black Stars, she is also a dedicated wife, a mother of four, a business woman and a devoted member of the Church of Pentecost in her area, popularly called Nana Appa in James Town, Accra, Ghana.

The struggle for female empowerment is typical for many Ghanaian women. Like Helen, they believe that women should have the opportunities to achieve what men can. They want to be self-sufficient, confident and free to pursue their passions.

Helen's passion is football. She is involved in the Women Supporters Union, an organisation that rallies behind both local and national teams. She attends soccer matches religiously and participates in the celebration by wearing her team's colours. In the run up to the FIFA World Cup soccer tournament, Helen, and women like her, will be preparing to go all out in support of their country.



Helen and her daughter, Mary, check their costumes to see if they are dry, before the game between the Black Stars and Sudan.

Helen, kisses her husband as she leaves their family home in James Town for Ohen Adjan Stadium in Accra.



Christopher Kwesi Teye helps his wife Helen with her football supporter's attire, as she prepares to go and cheer Ghana's National Football Team, the Black Stars, during their 2010 FIFA World Cup qualifier.



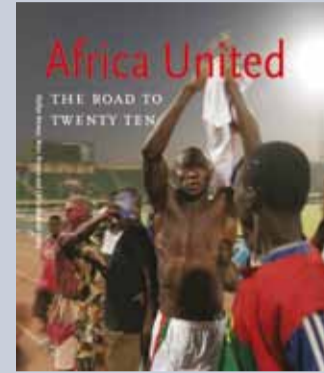
Helen plays football with local children at her home in James Town, Accra, Ghana.



Helen who sells clothes at Makola Market's Tudu area in Accra, shows samples to customers.



Amos Gumulira is a Malawian photojournalist working with Nation Publications Limited (NPL) in Lilongwe. He is also a correspondent for Agence France Presse and Getty Images. He has won several local and international awards, including 2009 National Media Institute of Southern Africa (Namisa) photojournalist of the year, joint winner of the 2009 Namisa Humans Rights Journalist of the Year, joint winner of the 2009 Namisa overall journalist of the year, the 2009 TNM Super League photojournalist of the year and the 1999 Malawi Press Photographer of the year. He holds a diploma from the Institute of Photography in Pretoria, South Africa, and is studying with the Institute of Professional Photography in the UK. He plans to launch a picture agency and develop his interest in teaching photography to beginners.



The Twenty Ten project has already resulted in a book, *Africa United: The Road to Twenty Ten* edited by Stefan Verwer, Marc Broere and Chris de Bode. The book, which is part of the project to use football as a catalyst to tell stories from an African perspective, is full of wonderful photographs and amazingly interesting stories from all over the continent.

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assumption: that the quality of each of the three assignments each journalist had to deliver would improve from one to the next.

From an assessment of the assignments delivered by this group of 128, 18 journalists have been selected to come to South Africa for June and half of July to cover stories on the ground – not sports reporting, but features that give breadth and depth to the news agency coverage.

These journalists represent 12 different countries (Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia) and all four disciplines: six radio and two multimedia journalists, six writers and four photographers.

At the same time, the “Allstar” journalists who remain in their home countries will also be producing features on the impact of the event in their respective home nations.

Already a book, called “Africa United,” has been produced from the project, as has a travelling exhibition that will tour a number of African countries after the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Africa Media Online is distributing the content to buyers in Africa and around the world.

It has been encouraging to see how the enduring features the journalists are producing are being snapped up by publications around the world as they are posted on <http://twentyten.africamediaonline.com>

“How well is the project working as a training tool?” you ask, noting that this is an age of radical change for journalists. My answer? It’s working radically well. But it would be more so if not for one drawback: African journalists have not been changing fast enough for the age. And this despite – and this is my personal belief – the fact that this age has more to benefit journalists in the Majority World than anybody else.

The change that I’m suggesting African journalists have been slow to adapt to is that of both a technological and mental shift. Yes, we’re all aware that bandwidth on this continent is a nightmare. But what struck me in each of the training sessions was how these African journalists were not using the free options that are available to them, or personal workflow systems that require lower bandwidth.

One seemingly silly example: at least 75% of these African journalists are using Yahoo for their mail – with an online mailbox only. The result: reading of mails – and therefore assessment and considered response – is rushed, as they can’t afford to spend too much time online. “Why not download to an offline inbox, read and respond at their leisure, and then log on again?” I would continually ask.

Google has some incredible research and storage tools – free – and yet very few of these journalists were familiar with even the most basic. Most did not know the mechanisms of a basic Google search, and would be simply flabbergasted when I showed them the wonders that were available to them at zero cost.

And that for me was the irony: we were teaching fairly sophisticated software programs, particularly to the radio, photography and multimedia journalists, and yet I found myself passionately wishing for the opportunity to spend more time with them sharing the basics – things that the experienced trainers whose history has been with large organisations in a pre-technological era might not be that adept at themselves.

On the subject of the mental shift, I come back to Abani: what are the stories we as Africans tell about ourselves? Therein – to my mind – lies the rub. To my frustration, I have found that the bulk of working African journalists we invited onto this project were initially not telling Africa’s stories; they were telling the stories – both in content and style – that they believed the Western international markets wanted.

Here we are talking of an age of radical change, and African voices seemed to be speaking with fake colonial accents, believing that was what was demanded. Even the stories they chose to tell were not those of their hearts, but those they believed were called for.

The irony, of course, is that the markets are wanting something new and the very people who could deliver this were still trying to play catch-up to the old theoretical glory days of journalism – days that no longer exist, for a myriad reasons.

It has been incredibly gratifying to see that Aha! moment in so many eyes when, through Twenty Ten’s training, journalists on our programme woke up to the fact that their voices were more relevant than ever.

And so together we grappled with some of the issues of practicality and ethic. (This of course is a continuum as the editorial team on which I serve arm-wrestles daily in the process of commissioning this network of African journalists to deliver content that is both relevant now and will stand the proverbial test of time.)

Abani again: “The question is how do I balance narratives that are wonderful with narratives of wounds and self loathing?”

After debating these issues in our workshops, I have seen some wonderfully simple and yet profound answers to that hard question. I think for example, of the photographs supplied by a range of our photographers of home-made footballs – usually balls of twine knotted into a vaguely round thing – across the continent.

At the start of the programme, they might have submitted these images as the story they believed the world wanted: the tired tale of Africa’s backwardness and poverty. A few months down the line, those self-same images are submitted more in the spirit of a celebration of creativity.

Certainly the pic by Julius Mwelu that USA Sports Illustrated is to pay good dollars for and run as a double page spread is one of triumph and defeating the odds. It is an image of pride painted on the faces of defiant African youth. It is the New African journalism that this project has helped bring forth.

And that, I believe, is one of the greatest legacies of the Twenty Ten project. We have some great journalists on this continent, but many had been brow-beaten into believing they had to present in a certain way.

Now, those old ways are broken. Across the globe, those old forms of journalism just don’t necessarily make sense anymore. And the new ways and forms might make a whole lot more sense in Africa. When we’re talking digital versus print, Africa’s photographers benefit. In the past they did not have the bandwidth to send the hi-res images that print needed, now their smaller files and their hyper-localism fit the online bill.

When we’re talking a world of short attention spans, traditional African storytelling is what’s new and fresh.

For more information on the Twenty Ten project, see www.roadto2010.com. Find Africa Media Online at www.africamediaonline.com.

