

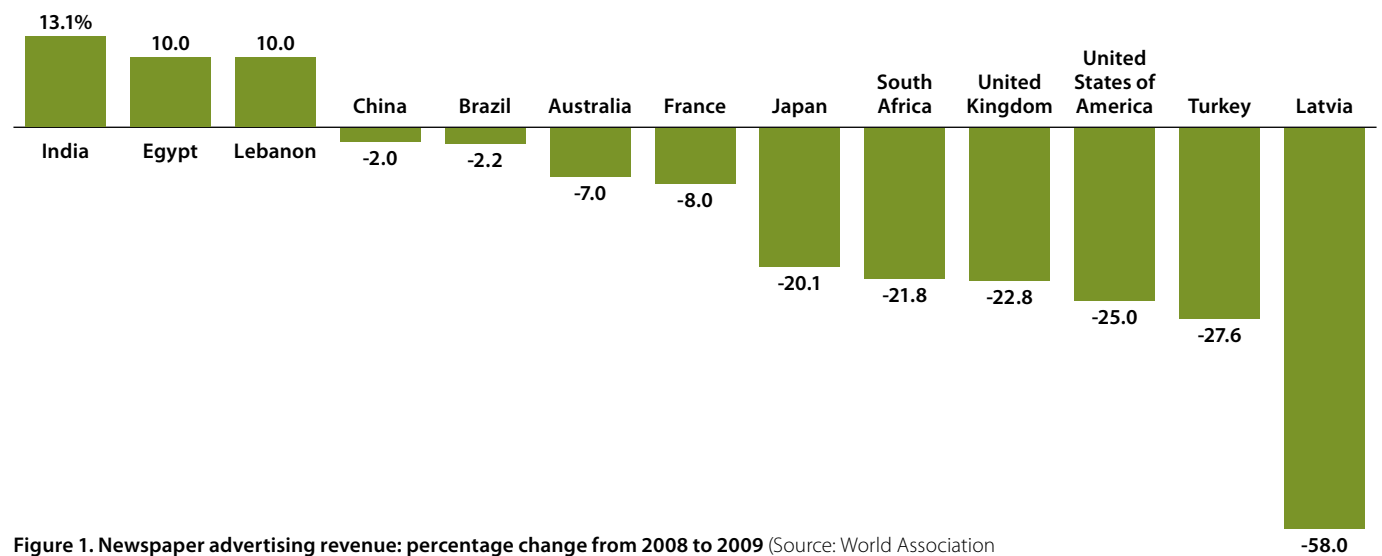


Amadou Mahtar Ba is optimistic – very optimistic – about the changes currently taking shape on the African media landscape. As Chief Executive of the African Media Initiative (AMI), he knows better than most the way in which media throughout Africa are making a difference at the national level and throughout the continent. “Rapid changes and meaningful changes are happening within the media landscape at large,” says Ba, who believes that by embracing these, mostly, technological changes, the media in Africa will continue to flourish, to draw in bigger audiences and to see continued growth.

## EMBRACE! INVEST! FLOURISH!

Currently the trend across Africa within the media landscape is growth – compared with its European and American counterparts who are feeling the full weight of the current financial crisis which has seen many newspapers downsize, cut jobs and suffer massive cost cutting strategies. Newspapers like the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The New York Times* and the Tribune Company (which owns the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Baltimore Sun*) have all felt the effects of the global economic crisis with huge debts and job losses.<sup>1</sup> Generally newspapers in the developed world have suffered in both readership and advertising revenue and seen a decline in their profit margins. While Ba admits that African countries are starting from a “lower point”, it does mean that they have greater space to grow and develop in a difficult market. In developed countries the opposite is true. Santhanam & Rosenstiel (2011)<sup>2</sup> note that

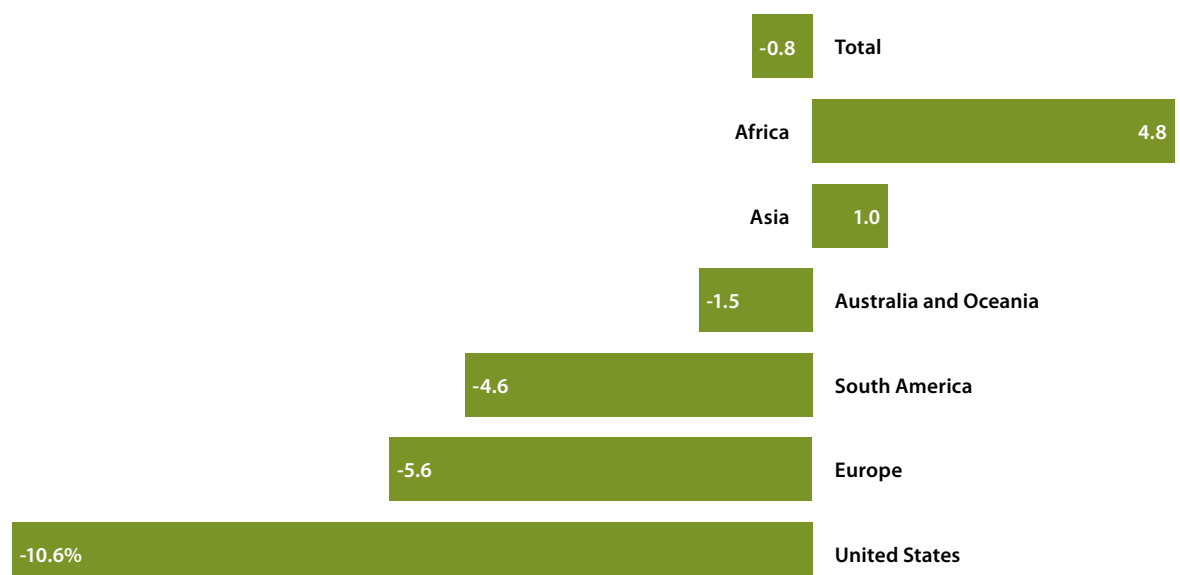
*The problem is greatest, generally, in developed countries where newspapers already are consumed in large percentages of the population and where there are a lot of media providing news and information. Print newspapers are thriving, meanwhile, in countries with untapped and emerging population segments.*



**Figure 1. Newspaper advertising revenue: percentage change from 2008 to 2009** (Source: World Association of Newspapers 2012 World Press Trends annual report)

Across Africa newspaper circulation in 2009 rose by 4.8% which would mean an even greater readership figure, while the global figure in 2009 saw a drop in newspaper circulation by 0.8% – Africa is bucking the trend and growing its newspaper figures in a declining market.

The problem in the developed media markets in both Europe and America, according to Ba, is that they invested too heavily in new media and digital platforms to the detriment of the print medium. “If you look at media houses in Europe or the United States, the investment has been so much in trying to adopt new technologies,



**Figure 2. Paid newspaper circulation: percentage change from 2008 to 2009** (Source: World Association of Newspapers 2012 World Press Trends annual report)

**Note:** Total represents circulation figures by continent. US included for comparison purposes.

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and most of them have moved most of their operations to digital, and that radical shift hasn't worked well." Experts have argued that offering free content through their websites has left newspapers vulnerable to declining readers and a lack of online advertising revenue. While many expected the internet to offer a boom in advertising potential, this has not been the case and newspaper companies struggle to find a balance between offering free content and making money.

Ba believes that African media now have the advantage and that it is up to them to make the global downturn an African upsurge. He warns, however, against companies neglecting their print business for the potential of the digital and online platform and believes instead that a balanced approach is the best option. "If you actually invest in digital you enlarge your audiences, not only at home within your national boundaries, but beyond your national boundaries, so however we look at it, my belief is that going digital to *enhance* our operations, our traditional operations, is the way to go. I'm not saying throw away the traditional models, I'm saying using new technologies to *enhance* traditional models." The message is clear, invest in new technological trends, but keep an eye on your core business – newspapers.

The biggest technological revolution in Africa is currently taking place and it is being led by the mobile phone. Mobile phone penetration in Africa has reached 500 million, it is the fastest growing mobile market in the world, and currently has the most mobile phone subscribers after Asia.<sup>3</sup> The media in Africa would have to be far removed from reality not to realise the potential this market offers them. "You can simply imagine what can happen if each country's media houses can reach audiences using that kind of technology!"

The plan seems simple – by investing now in new digital technology, media houses will be able to harness the power of mobile phones, and in this way attract more readers, which means growing newspaper circulation, and in doing so growing revenue, so that they are able to invest more in technology. "We have an

unprecedented opportunity using these technologies to reach greater masses and media houses on the continent need to find a way of doing just that, of harnessing these technologies to reach greater audiences, as that will help them in their circulation and help them in sourcing more advertising as they are reaching more people."

The biggest problem is that the media in Africa do not always have access to investment capital to be able to harness the potential of this new technological opportunity. This is part of the work done by the AMI, and that has seen the organisation launch a \$1-million African News Innovation Challenge. The aim of the competition is to find media companies or newsrooms that are using digital media products and technology in an innovative and new way. The challenge is clear and Ba makes no qualms about expressing what this competition means. "My commitment is to say you guys out here don't sit and say you can't do anything because you don't have the money, have your ideas and bring us your ideas, we will evaluate them and make sure that if it is a great idea, that it will succeed."

African media can look at a number of local examples of media companies using digital technologies to try and improve their core business. Ba cites South Africa's *Mail&Guardian* a number of times during our interview as a media house which is growing and adds that "they have obviously invested heavily in new media and on digital platforms, but also that investment was done, not to get rid of traditional options, but to enhance what the *Mail&Guardian* was doing, and that is the way of the future." The *Mail&Guardian* has recently designed and built a new website, which, according to Chris Roper *Mail&Guardian Online* editor was done because "the modern news organisation has to cater for the powerful new tools available to journalists, and indeed to readers. For example, social media has become integral to the dissemination and creation of news, and our new site will make it much easier to share content, and to collaborate on bringing news stories to

light."<sup>4</sup> It seems the organisation has much the same philosophy as Ba, by making a website that harnesses the advantages of an online platform such as being easily and instantly updated, while still giving their loyal readers the in-depth content they read in the paper version, which does in fact harness a second advantage of an online platform – it allows much greater depth and a longer word count than even the lengthy *Mail&Guardian* investigative pieces. Roper adds to his readers, "We need to make sure that you have a front page that changes with the 24/7 demands of breaking news, but at the same time allow you to easily find the big, heavyweight pieces that are primarily why you come to the *Mail&Guardian*."

Ba's optimism is infectious and it seems that African media are on the same page, technologically speaking, in harnessing the potential of digital and online platforms to enhance their reach. The positive message is underpinned however, by a warning from Ba: while investing in new technology and embracing the mobile market as a space for optimum growth, media houses have to ensure that they remain "true to the core principles of journalism". He has the last word, which balances both caution and optimism. "We must not forget that journalism is changing very fast in the landscape which is more and more dominated by devices which are digital devices and journalists need to adapt, news organisations need to adapt, and newsrooms need to adapt. But while doing that we should always keep in mind that we absolutely as journalists have to stay true to being fair and balanced."

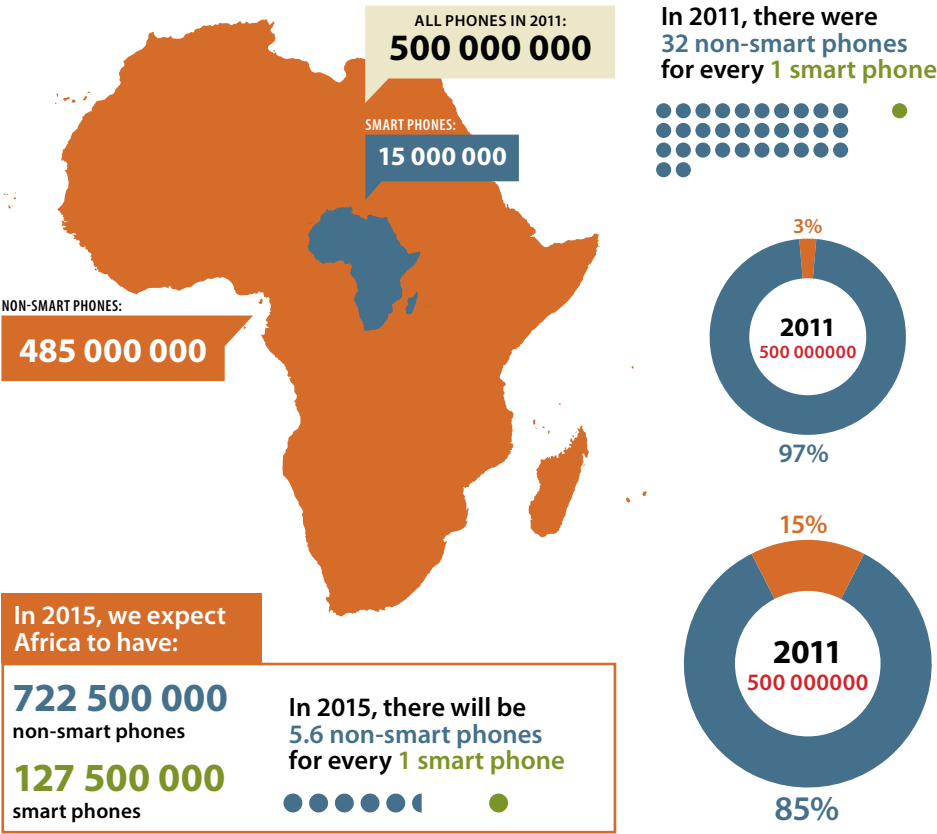


Figure 3. Mobile phones in Africa. (Sources: Informa Telecoms and Media. Infographic designed by @ivanisawesome)

Endnotes

1. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7913400.stm>
2. <http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2011/mobile-survey/international-newspaper-economics/>
3. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15659983>
4. <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-05-06-the-new-mail-guardian/>