

## IN THE MEANTIME IN AFRICA...

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In January 2011 *The Economist* reported that “Africa is now one of the world’s fastest-growing regions.”<sup>1</sup> An analysis of the first decade of the new millennium showed that six of the world’s fastest-growing economies were in sub-Saharan Africa.

Within a couple of days the report triggered almost 50 posts from bloggers all over the world. It gave an interesting impression of the opinions on economic development and Africa in general. A lot of the first-moment posts reflected either joy (“Finally, some good news for Africa”) or cynicism (“I still do not put much hope on this pathetic continent”). They revealed above all the images that first popped up as soon as the word Africa was mentioned.

Africa was bad news’ and ‘incapable of sustainable development, despite positive growth. It was interesting to see that the first reactions by bloggers were based on feelings and impressions; facts and theory only later entered the online discussions. It highlighted the power of existing representations and the flaw in human intelligence to accept existing beliefs rather than exceptions. Swiss novelist and thinker Rolf Dobelli in his 2011 publication *The Art of Thinking Clearly* called this confirmation bias the mother of all errors of judgment.

### Media images

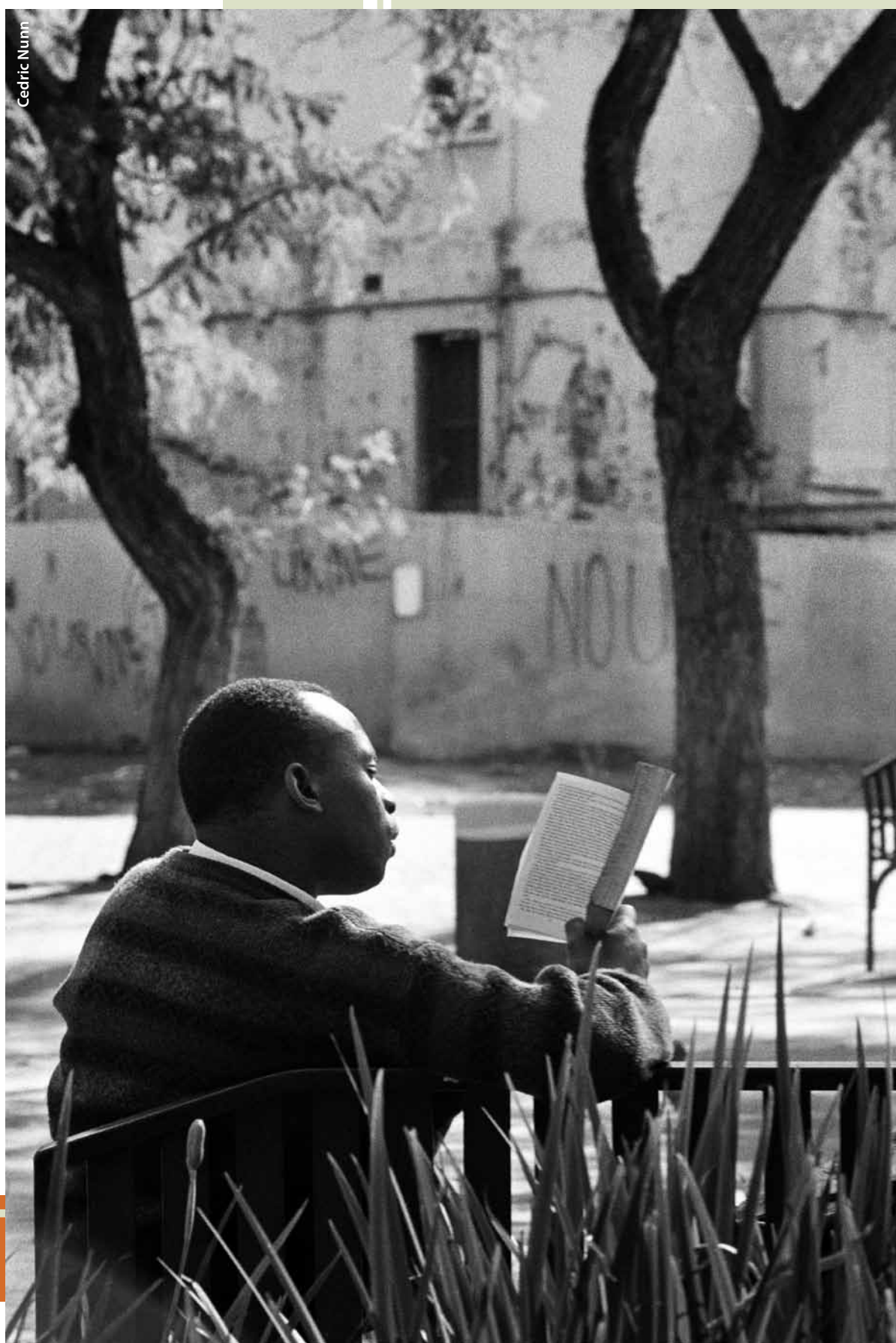
But what about the traditional media? Did they manage to paint new pictures of progress in Africa or did they just follow the GDP-trail of bankers and politicians? Did they tell more than the stories of companies that paid their fieldtrips to new enterprises in the dark heart of Africa where modern leaders were guiding former conflict areas to new horizons? They tried, struggled, achieved some success, but failed overall.

In the first quarter of 2008 the financial crisis was looming but it had not yet hit. Africa had experienced positive growth for over a decade and there was much more going on than dry GDP figures could reveal. For instance, the fact that migrant remittances were starting to exceed donor funding. Or the rapid spread of cell phones offering opportunities for citizens to take development into their own hands. Did media manage to cover these changing socio-economic realities and were they able to do this from a bottom-up perspective? The surprised reactions by bloggers showed that at least their images of Africa had not changed over the past decade. An interesting and recent example is the reporting on piracy in the waters east of Africa. A quick search for articles on the subject revealed one dominant opinion: piracy is a bad thing and pirates are criminals. A whole set of moral values on piracy is at play here and lots of trading interests, the ideal field for a confirmation bias. Indeed, the majority of opinions and facts supported that representation, framed in a nice and clear good guys-bad guys format. A recent study on piracy by the British think-tank Chatham-House, however, “concluded that significant amounts of ransom money were spent in the regional centres, with the benefits being shared out between a large number of people due to the clan structures in place”. This showed a completely different perspective on safety and development connected to piracy. Hardly any media picked it up.

There are basically two ways to cover the changing socio-economic realities in Africa. One is to show a broader perspective on development as is advocated by instruments such as the HDI. This could result in stories on topics other than the ones belonging to the GDP-frame. Instead of the well-known focus on foreign direct investments, commodity prices and natural resources, stories could cover education, skills development and corporate social responsibility. Another way is to change the perspective, away from the financial and political elites and their structures and strategies to other participants in society and their realities. To write about development bottom-up. A research into three of South Africa’s mainstream print media, all with a different focus and audience, revealed that broadening the scope of development is feasible, telling the stories bottom-up is difficult, but combining the two is close to impossible. Smaller budgets and subsequently smaller newsrooms and higher work load are only part of the explanation.

### Business Day

As a financial newspaper *Business Day* covered a lot of company news and kept to the old religion that money makes the world go round. A rough analysis of the words they used in articles on African countries in the first quarter of 2008 told the familiar



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[illegible]

A map of the countries covered in that first quarter for a large part equaled a map of countries dependent on oil production and mining.

Africa in Beeld

0	<2
2 - 4.9	5 - 9.9
10 - 24.9	>25

## Beeld

The argument was that the language barrier made it hard to include news from French press agency AFP. But with easy access to translation services on the net, that should hardly be a problem these days. It probably had more to do with the way Africa was viewed. An analysis into 121 articles covering developments in Africa in the first quarter of 2008 revealed a dominant “fragile states discourse” with themes such as conflict, corruption and political instability.

City Press

Interest Category	Percentage
Politics	48%
Art, music, leisure	2%
Sports	17%
Economy	11%
Environment, tourism	6%
Health, education	16%

But they didn't report a lot on economic development, only 7% of all articles in those first three months of 2008. *City Press*, like *Beeld*, put a strong emphasis on South African companies, but it took a different approach. *City Press* showed how South African investments could benefit Africa and not the other way round. An article on the appointment of Standard Bank's new chief executive Simpiwe Tshabalala presented it as encouragement for new black leadership on the continent<sup>4</sup>. Most articles showed different aspects of development and not the familiar GDP story. In some articles *City Press* managed to cover developments bottom-up, for instance by voicing community members and women directors on theatre productions that uplifted communities<sup>5</sup>.

## Endnotes

1. Daily Chart: Africa's Impressive Growth. Africa is now one of the world's fastest-growing regions. The Economist Online, 06-01-2011 [http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/01/daily\\_chart](http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/01/daily_chart)
2. Broadman, Harry G., (2007), Africa's Silk Road, China and India's new frontier, The World Bank, Washington
3. In: Mosambiek gaan aktief meer buitelandse beleggings in mega-projekte lok [Mozambique will actively attract more foreign investments and mega projects], Charles Mangwiro, 17 March 2008
4. Inspired and motivated at Standard Bank, Andile Ntingi, 8 March 2008
5. Female actors still looking on from the curtains of the stage, 23 February 2008