



Tiffany Majero

THE AFRICAN MEDIA BAROMETER

Not just another media index

By Mareike le Pelley

The African Media Barometer (AMB) is a tool to self-assess the respect for freedom of expression and information and the state of the media in a specific country. In recognition of the crucial role of freedom of expression and media freedom in good governance and democratisation processes and while noting that the African Peer Review Mechanism had left out the media sector, the AMB was conceived by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and the media project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (now fesmedia Africa) in 2004 and 2005.

The AMB formulates 39 indicators, sorted into four sectors, which are based on African declarations, charters and protocols. The four sectors address: 1. the regulatory framework for freedom of expression and whether it is effectively implemented, 2. the diversity and accessibility of the media, 3. broadcasting regulation and the state broadcaster and 4. the professional performance of and the working conditions within the media sector.

Panellists from their respective countries, half of them representing the media sector and half of them representing other parts of civil society, spend one and a half

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days discussing the indicators and giving a score of one to five for each, with one being the lowest possible score and five the highest.

Their discussions are moderated by a trained facilitator who ensures that a range of issues are thoroughly covered. After the event a rapporteur puts together a comprehensive report of the deliberations.

Between 2005 and the end of 2012 AMB panel discussions were held in 29 African countries and a total of 80 AMB reports were produced¹. Some countries have so far hosted only one AMB panel discussion, such as Ethiopia, Guinea-Conakry or the DRC, while others, such as Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania, or Zimbabwe, have been covered by four reports already. In 2009 the barometer was adapted and introduced to Asia and the first barometer panel discussion in Eastern Europe took place in 2011².

Yet another media index?

The AMB is different in several important ways from other media assessment tools. First, and foremost, the indicators are based on African documents, making the AMB a home-grown instrument. Secondly, the indicators are only given scores by the expert panellists in a country and it is these scores that all averages are calculated from. No external scoring or evaluation by outside experts is added, making sure that the resulting report is fully owned by the members of the panel.

Thirdly, the panellists are carefully selected based on certain criteria which are to ensure that they not only bring to the discussion considerable expertise but also represent as much as possible the various voices of a specific country. For example the media sector is to be represented by urban and rural media, by print and broadcast media, by private and state media houses, by men and women, by journalists as well as editors and owners.

The entire selection of experts is to take into account different interests, regions, and religions. Putting together a panel, which answers to all set criteria, is highly ambitious but serious efforts are undertaken each time to come as close as possible to the ideal.

A qualitative tool with detail and depth

One reason the AMB may be less known than some other media assessment tools is related to one of the above mentioned strengths. Since all scores are exclusively given by the AMB panellists, the results are mainly qualitative in nature. While some indicators are mostly to be scored on the basis of certain facts (for example on the existence or non-existence of a

certain piece of legislation), the majority (also) require a subjective assessment of the situation: is the law being implemented, and if so, to what degree? Are media applying their codes of ethics and reporting professionally? Are people afraid to speak their minds? Do the media reflect all voices in society? How easy is it to obtain publicly held information?

AMB panel discussions are held among knowledgeable experts, including at least one person with legal expertise. They are given the necessary documents to base their discussions on and have the chance to exchange facts and opinions between each other with the moderator pointing out the various aspects and sub-issues of each indicator.

However, at the end of the day, the report will still be on the one hand a compilation of individual perspectives and on the other hand a reflection of the political culture and history of the country.

Depending on whether a country is just emerging from many years of autocracy or civil strife, or whether it has enjoyed peace and the respect of basic human rights for a number of years, citizens will value and assess freedoms and media performance quite differently. Where people have been free to express themselves for a while, they may award high scores. However, they may also have acquired a more critical mindset and might be more likely to come down hard on any still existing shortcomings by scoring very low on certain indicators.

These considerations make a comparison of average scores across countries and thus any sort of country ranking impossible. Even comparisons within a country over time have to be done carefully as the composition of the panel may change from one AMB to the next.

Why is scoring done at all?

The AMB scores are useful for at least three reasons:

Firstly, low indicator averages are likely to point to the most critical areas, which require advocacy work by civil society and/or the attention of a country's policy and law makers.

Secondly, indicators, where individual scores differ greatly, for example with part of the panel scoring one or two, while the rest is scoring four or five, point to a substantial polarisation of the panellists, which may also reflect divisions in society on a larger scale. Any advocacy work in these areas would have to take this into account.

Thirdly, at the end of each AMB panel discussion, the indicator averages of the previous years' discussions are put next to the current ones. While the average scores of some indicators will have moved very little,

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others will see large up or downward movements. The issues covered by those indicators require more in-depth analysis in order to assess whether the situation has really deteriorated or improved that much, or whether the drastic change in the average score for that particular indicator compared to the previous score is the result of different views of a different panel.

What do the AMB reports tell us?

Besides the information the scores convey, the main benefit of the AMB is the thorough discussion and analysis, which are captured in the AMB report. The analysis provides substance to the information given by the scores and supplies a multitude of additional details, facts and information about the panellists' views and their assessments of the country's media and the state of freedom of expression.

Notwithstanding all the differences that exist between individual countries, a careful reading of AMB-reports over the years reveal that certain issues feature in the majority of countries assessed. Here are some of them:

- While freedom of expression is usually well protected in the constitution and sometimes additional media legislation, other legal provisions and the political reality on the ground often restrict the full enjoyment of that right. Good legislation is hardly ever effectively implemented.
- State broadcasters are still under the control of the government of the day. Neither their editorial nor financial independence is secured.
- Self censorship and corruption in the media (brown envelope journalism) are wide spread. Many governments use the placement of government advertisements to influence editorial content. In some countries ownership of media by politicians or political parties or those close to them has negative impacts on media diversity and media ethics.
- New media usually do not suffer from interference from government. However, a few countries experience the shut-down or disruption of text messaging services and the filtering and blocking of websites.
- In most countries the working conditions of journalists are precarious, with low salaries, many without fixed contracts and poor benefits.

- Frequently, there is low compliance with professional codes of conduct.
- The distribution of print media in rural areas and the full coverage of remote areas by broadcasting services is still a challenge.

In conclusion, AMB reports offer several benefits:

- They provide a great source of information and detail, and an in-depth analysis of the media sector and the state of freedom of expression and information in a particular country.
- They capture the perspectives and experiences of a wide range of experts from the country and thereby also allow insights into the historical and political context, in which freedom of expression has to be placed.
- They enable the reader to discover broader trends, developments and shortcomings in the media field and with regard to freedom of expression across countries in Africa.
- They can be used for advocacy campaigns for political reform. The reports' major strengths for advocacy work derive from being owned by the panellists and being the result of a home-grown tool based on African documents.

On the fesmedia Africa website³ you find regularly updated posts and articles on media development on the continent. They are sorted into different categories ranging from factual items to opinion pieces, short news to longer analyses. Many items are collected from other websites and reposted but the site also features the various publications of *fesmedia Africa*, the media project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The calendar and archive links facilitate the search for older posts by topic, year and country while the library gives access to a collection of more in-depth papers on media development, which can also be searched by topic. The website is a work in progress. Besides being regularly updated, the search function is currently being improved by assigning more key words and giving easier access to archived material.

The website targets media and civil society activists, policy makers and the academic sector. It also features a call for papers⁴, which offers graduate students the chance to be published online (and perhaps in paper) under the expert guidance of a senior journalist.



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Endnotes

1. <http://www.fesmedia-africa.org/home/what-we-do/africa-media-barometer-amb/amb-country-reports/>
2. <http://www.fesmedia-asia.org/home/asian-media-barometer-anmb/digbib/>
3. www.fesmedia-africa.org
4. <http://www.fesmedia-africa.org/home/what-is-news/media-publications-events/>