Africa's media must tell the African story

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One of the objects of the media is to understand the popular feeling and give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments; the third is fearlessly to expose popular defects - Mahatma Gandhi

"The media, with specific reference to the collective entity of newspapers, radio, television digital and social networks, play a very important role in national development," said Linus Gitahi, the chief executive officer of the Nation Media Group (NMG) in his presentation.

Influencing behaviour

NMG is one of East Africa's largest media groups with businesses in both print and broadcast media. According to Gitahi, there are basic factors in the way media influences development. "Every medium has a message; it has a target audience; it aims at influencing a change; it influences attitudes, perceptions and decision- making; and it generally influences behaviour."

One of the issues that came up during the session was how the African media tells stories about Africa. "The media is to blame for the post election violence that happened in Kenya in 2007/8!" said a delegate during the Q&A session. This was followed by a debate on what delegates felt was the slanted coverage of issues by media.

Telling the African story

Historically, Africa has a long history of storytelling through oral tradition. Orators used all communication tools to be effective, including music and ancient instruments. These storytellers of old acted as opinion leaders, the modern equivalent being the media and all the voices occupying the social media landscape.

"Yet, amidst the proliferation of information on mainstream media and social platforms, the challenge that remains is that of untold stories," noted Gitahi adding that it is only when the media in Africa begins to tell these stories will the importance of reconstituting the relevance of African media in framing African development challenge be realised and assist in identifying and dealing with core constraints.

According to African Capacity Building Foundation, 19% of the population contribute to news generation, 69% listen to media messages and 52% are inactive.

"The concern therefore is the unevenness in news generation and the quality of the media professionals who do generate

stories," noted Gitahi.

Although a lot of work needs to be done, the Kenyan media is beginning to tell the African story; for example A24 Media project - Africa - What's your story? and NMG's Africareview.com that seeks to highlight the common problems that the people of Africa share, and also promote transparency and accountability and a precise reporting of the realities of Africa. "Our stories can only be accurately be told by the African Media not CNN, Al Jazeera or BBC."

Media and war stories

The media have force-multiplying effects, especially during war. Gitahi believes the media can be a potent force multiplier by their ability to mould national and international opinion. "The Africa Union Mission in Somalia military interventions are an example of how media can play a critical role when information is readily availed to tell the African military success story against terrorism."

How the media covers war has always been a major debate world over. For example CNN has been accused of biased reporting during the Iraq war. Media is used as part of wining the war and by dominating the information environment; the military or warring country sets an agenda.

Additionally as Gitahi argued, the involvement of media not only develops public awareness and the support of the military in operations, they also have the benefit of enhancing the morale of troops by informing their families and friends of their activities. "If the media are used prudently therefore, they build public opinion as force multiplier."

Enabling environment

As a watch dog and gatekeeper, the media is expected to provide an atmosphere for healthy trade; foster business climate of transparency and accountability; and ensure that accurate financial information is available to investors.

"The media can however make or mar the enabling environment. Publications on threats to the national security environment, such as wars, civil unrests, epidemics violent crimes, corruption etc., are known to have scared away investors."

Indeed, the lack of media responsibility can lead to capital flight, disinvestment, and decline in production and services. "Freedom of expression as a fundamental right, must go with corresponding media responsibility. It should be noted that the media, though committed to getting the story right, are also in the business of reporting exciting news to sell." If not well balanced, by taking cognisance of national interest, such news can have a devastating effect on national economy.

Doom and gloom

While the media aims for balanced reporting, there is always a balancing act. Balance would dispel the notion that the media are obsessed with gloom and doom.

"We should focus on the root cause of the choice of headlines. When politicians in Kenya want to move election to August 2013, we think it deserves a headline. When a tender for equipment is on the verge of being awarded to a company that is blacklisted, we think it deserves a headline!" noted Gitahi, who wondered why great innovations like MPESA, the marine fibre optic cable, the Konza Technopolis etc do not make headline news.

"What about Kenya's super highway which headlined as one of a kind in Sub-Saharan Africa? When the same road is said to kill 60 people every month does that grab headlines as well? Or when Devolution of governance in Kenya brings development closer to the people but allows for greater attrition and wastage of resources due to weak public accountability and capacity frameworks how do you categorize this?"

Gitahi noted that media must be professional and objective adding that factors like media bias, sensationalism, propaganda

and distortions, negatively affect the contribution of the media in development. "Freedom of the media must therefore go along with responsibility." Another factor of success Gitahi noted was professionalism and objectivity.

Impact of technology

In Kenya, mainstream media and broadcasting outlets are grappling with how the internet and mobile technology impact media consumption and production. Traditional media organisations are starting to engage viewers, listeners, and readers who can contribute content through mobile and web-based platforms. Media organisations are also increasingly making content available for mobile devices. Additionally, mobile phones with more sophisticated and varied functionality and internet access provide new interactive channels for a better-informed and more active global society.

"The ubiquity of citizen media content produced by private citizens who are otherwise not professional journalists is on the increase. Everyday citizens producing, collecting, and sharing information characterise citizen media," noted Gitahi.

There is a plethora of applications that exist solely in the commercial space that have reached global critical mass and that have played a role in the rise of citizen media--including media generated by mobile. YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook come to mind as the most prominent.

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