

Media trends in Africa for 2012

 By [Oresti Patricios](#)

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The continent's future is tied to its media. Free open media promises much for flourishing democracies and economic growth, but authoritarian states will struggle to let go of controls.



2012 is upon us after being the subject of much superstition, with beliefs ranging from this year being a time of transformation to more apocalyptic myths that the world's going to end because of indications contained in the Mesoamerican Long Count, or Mayan calendar.

A mixed bag for media in Africa

These madly divergent high and low road 'scenarios' are about as mixed as the media's fortunes in Africa. 2012 offers massive opportunity for the continent's media, but there's also great peril.

The year had no sooner started when the [Centre for the Protection of Journalists](#) announced that two journalists had been held in Somali's Puntland without being charged; Gabon had suspended a TV station and newspaper for covering opposition politicians; and that a journalist and videographer were shot and killed in Syria.

Authoritarian Africa, dangerous for journalists

Journalism proved a treacherous profession in Africa in 2011 where [Daily Maverick reports](#) that 12 journalists were killed, while 52 journalists were incarcerated on predominantly manufactured charges. However, despite the clamping down on free and fair media in more authoritarian parts of Africa, there were promising signs of moves toward open access to information and media freedom in other parts of the continent.

In September last year journalists, academics and government officials from across the continent gathered in Cape Town to sign a declaration calling on the continent to promote access to information across Africa. In June President Mwai Kibaki of Kenya launched that country's Open Data Initiative which made key government data freely available to the public online.

Two months earlier President Goodluck Jonathan signed Nigeria's Freedom of Information Bill (FOI) into law. Under the act the destruction of public documents and the denial of access to information are punishable by law, but the act has yet to be taken fully advantage of in that country. For media to be truly free, statutes mustn't just be proclaimed in government gazettes, but need to be tested and taken advantage of by civil society.

Secrecy bill blight on SA media freedom

The move to a more free media and open access to information by some African governments must be lauded, but one needs to bear in mind that currently only six countries have freedom of information laws in place (Nigeria; Uganda; Liberia; Ethiopia; Angola and South Africa). And South Africa is engaged in fierce protesting to stave off a [Protection of Information Bill](#) or 'secrecy law' that will have a profound impact on media freedoms.

While pockets of progress are promising and must be encouraged, 2012 will remain a year in which journalists will continue to fight against tight-fisted control of public information and media freedoms by more authoritarian governments. In South Africa the ANC's recent 100 year celebrations contained speeches which indicated that the battle lines between the ruling party and the media have been clearly drawn. The attrition that was so clear between the two last year will continue well into 2012.

Even though authoritarian governments in Africa have sought to restrict media freedoms, the media sector is buoyant and offers good investment opportunities. Parminder Vir, director of PVL Media Consultants told [TradeInvest](#) that African media remains one of the continent's fastest growing industries and that media and entertainment industries are showing above average growth.

Media shows good growth in Africa

She says Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and South Africa offer the greatest opportunities for both media content and media distribution across television, digital media, mobile and other media. The reason for the media boom she says is urbanisation, youth and the expansion of an emerging middle-class who will contribute to the sectors future growth.

Another promising sign of growth in the sector is the boom in participation in the African Media Leaders Forum (AMLF) which was formed some four years ago. Focused on helping media owners to create more effective business models the AMLF hopes to develop a vibrant media sector on the continent to "help citizens affect social, economic and political change" and to hold leaders accountable to their mandate. When the AMLF held its first meeting in Dakar, Senegal four years ago 50 media leaders attended. In 2011 that mushroomed to 350 delegates from 48 African countries.

During the last conference the media leaders signed the 2011 Tunis Declaration to urge African leaders to recognise and strengthen the role that media plays in consolidating democracy and good governance in Africa. "We believe the media sector can play a hugely supportive role in the expansion of democracy through an informed citizenry, and support processes of good governance through exercising the traditional watchdog function. Deficits in democracy and governance are inimical to the growth of Africa's media sector," the signatories to the declaration said.

Growth in Africa hinges on open access to information and free media

The media leaders are right in that Africa's media and the continents fortunes are directly tied to each other. Research shows that free media fosters vibrant democracies, thriving economies and creates open environments with a contestation of ideas that investors want to participate in. Close, dictatorial and authoritarian environments aren't good for media growth or investment. To promote positive growth trends African nation leaders need to realise that media openness, freedom, growth and diversity is crucial.

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