

Africa: In the Media Development Vanguard

REMARKS TO THE FIRST AFRICAN MEDIA DEVELOPMENT FORUM

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First, let me say that it is an honor to be here with all of you, and also to be representing Scholastica Kimaryo, the director of UNDP's regional center for Southern and Eastern Africa. She could not deliver this keynote address due to an emergency UN meeting in Nairobi on the food crisis. Scholastica is herself a former journalist and media activist – before joining the UN she was head of the national union of journalists in Tanzania– and she very much wanted to be here today. This is a cause she deeply believes in, as do many of my UN colleagues. That's why there are a half dozen of us UNDP folks here in this room with you. We want to learn more about what you are doing, and how we in the UN can do more to support locally driven media projects and priorities -- which is what this Forum is ultimately all about.

Second, let me please stress that I speak today in Scholastica's place with all due humility. I am certainly not an African, nor even an Africanist, despite fairly constant involvement with African journalism projects and press issues over the years. I strongly believe that the solutions, reforms, and advances in media development in Africa will be identified and implemented here, not imported from the U.S. or Europe. I am also convinced that Africa will ultimately teach us more about media development than the other way around, which is why this talk has the title you see in the agenda: "Africa: In the Media Development Vanguard."

So I am here mainly to learn and listen, and to offer any support that I can. But I have been asked to first defend my thesis a bit. So: Why can it be said that Africa is the vanguard, the cutting edge of media development? Because this is all about CHANGE, the watchword of the day. Africa is not just where things need to happen – it is where things CAN and DO happen.

- Why? The needs and demand for media support are undeniably great, maybe more than anywhere else in the world. But that's not the main thing. The key thing is the tremendous opportunity for both immediate and lasting impact. If you get the policies and projects and politics and people right – granted, this is a huge challenge – you can accomplish more with less in Africa than anywhere else in the world today.
- Why? Africa is a development and democratization laboratory, with more than 50 fast-evolving countries, each with much to teach and learn from the others – lessons both positive and grimly cautionary. Though it is essential for world media to continue to focus on the crises in Darfur, in the DRC, and next door in Zimbabwe, it is also true that one of the great undercovered stories in the past decade has been the quiet democratization of Africa. We've witnessed the transfer of power to newly elected governments in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, Mozambique, Kenya and many others -- countries that were once ravaged by war or governed by dictators, or both. None were without complications. And in every case the best of the local media played a critical, constructive role, despite enormous pressures.
- As I meet my colleagues in Africa – I'm one of those "former" journalists who can't get used to that adjective -- I am frankly envious. Nowhere is journalism more important, more an integral part of the nation-building process, with so much at stake, from democratization and basic political stability to life-and-death health and environmental and economic issues. In many places journalists uncovering corruption scandals can save taxpayers money, send bad guys to jail, ruin the careers of crooked politicians, and other such good things. But in Africa the stakes are a bit higher: here we have seen corruption propel countries into war, drive millions into exile and famine, ruin local environments for generations to come. Journalists everywhere cover elections. But elections in Africa are part and parcel of a fundamental nation-building process, or nation-rebuilding process, with great potential historic significance, and huge potential consequences, for good and for ill. And the media is not just an observer, but also a key actor, raising issues and defining parties and candidates for the voters -- making independence and accuracy and balance all the more critical, and also the technical capacity to reach and represent all communities freely and fairly.

- The bottom line is that journalism in Africa really, really matters. As a result you see tremendous energy and creativity – and also great bravery. The risks faced daily by hundreds of African journalists across the continent would have driven most of us out of the profession at an early age, regretting that we hadn't gone into accounting or dentistry instead. But the prevailing mood among African journalists is anything but grim or beleaguered. To the contrary: There is almost ebullience, a determination to defy intimidation and overcome economic limitations, and to have fun doing it, if at all possible. You feel that spirit all around here in Grahamstown, at the Forum and in the Highway Africa sessions, as you do almost anywhere when African journalists get together.
- Africa is also in the vanguard of the global discussion about what we actually mean by “democratic governance,” (as we say in development-speak). Everyone recognizes that it goes way beyond the celebration of regular elections to what governments actually do in office, including fundamental questions of transparency and responsiveness and the delivery of public services. The media has a key role in keeping everyone accountable, as is increasingly recognized, even in government.
- The oversized role of foreign development assistance in African economic life heightens the media's clout. In finance ministries, for example, reform-minded technocrats who are charged with enacting safeguards against budget fraud and the theft or squandering of income from natural resources have come to realize that good journalists are their natural allies. In each of the first three national reports to come out of the Africa Peer Review Mechanism process – in Ghana, Kenya and Rwanda – the teams looking at transparency and corruption issues independently concluded that their countries would benefit from more vigorous, professional investigative journalism. They may not know how to accomplish that – but that's our job.
- Access to information: More than 70 countries in the world now have freedom of information statutes of varying kinds, but it is widely agreed that the best and most-far reaching of these is South Africa's, where it is enshrined in the constitution itself. Freedom of information bills is now either pending or about to be introduced in the legislatures of Nigeria, Kenya, Liberia, Ghana, Tanzania, and elsewhere. Their

fate may be quite uncertain but the bills themselves are for the most part very good, better than the standards prevailing in Asia and Latin America and (one could argue) most of non-Northern Europe as well. Of course, as we know from our experience implementation is everything, which fundamentally goes back to political will, but also to government skills and resources. But getting these bills passed and put into practice should be a priority for African media and African civil society working in partnership, setting an example for the world.

- In technology, Africa is also increasingly in the vanguard. Africa has leapfrogged over old communications technologies like tethered land-line telephones, going directly to mobile phones. Cell phone penetration has increased almost exponentially in the past five years, far outstripping even the most ambitious predictions. And with it has come the creative use of mobile phones in everything from microfinance to farming to political mobilization. China is the first big place with more people accessing the internet access through cell phones than through PCs, but Africa will surely be the second. The announcement here this week that Rhodes University will have the first endowed journalism chair in the world focused on media and mobile telephony says it all. We will all be watching, and learning.
- Back in the first world, we media folks are increasingly panicked and clueless about what to do next. In my own country at least (the USA), the old commercial model for national and international news gathering and analysis seems irretrievably broken. Look at the immensely rich American broadcasting industry: The big private national networks long ago gave up serious daily journalism, shutting down not only foreign bureaus but bureaus that it used to maintain across the United States. Entertainment and sports is where the money is, which is true of television and radio everywhere. On the radio dial the only remaining serious source for news is National Public Radio, which is financed by US taxpayers and private donations. That should tell us something.
- The big newspapers are still the media leaders in defining and unearthing and analyzing “news” on a daily basis, but their situation is far more dire, because unlike broadcasters they don’t have entertainment-generated ad revenue to fall back on. Classified ads migrating to the internet were the beginning of the end of the

classic daily paper business model. As an American journalist, I have had the privilege of working at different times for three of what were generally regarded the four best newspapers in my country: the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and the New York Times. (The fourth would be the Wall Street Journal.) What they all once had in common -- aside from professionalism and national impact -- were that these were all family businesses, with very wealthy owners who considered their properties a kind of public trust, and who protected the papers from political and business pressures even though they could have been wealthier if they just sold out and retired to their yachts and horse farms.

- That era is ending. Today, the LA Times, long since sold off by the Chandler family, is a shrinking shadow of its former self. The Journal has just been sold by the Bancroft clan to Murdoch, who is remaking the paper into something that already looks quite different. The Post stays afloat due to the largesse and noblesse oblige of the Graham family and business partners like Warren Buffett – who can afford to do so because the Post Company makes a lot of money from non-newspaper sources. Yet the Post too is getting smaller and less ambitious. And finally, there is the Times, still the best journalistically of the four, thanks to the Sulzbergers, but with a steeply falling stock price and predator investors circling like sharks. It may just be matter of time before the New York Times succumbs to the inevitable. And this is in the richest country in the world, the home of the First Amendment.
- Increasingly, investigative journalism and even old-fashioned political coverage is coming from start-up websites, some of them not-for-profit, others for-profit in theory but not very profitable. In the United States some are very local, filling the niche of the small town newspaper. Some are very ambitious and national in scope, filling the void left by the disbanded reporting teams of once-great newspaper chains and once-proud big city papers in places like Miami, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis and Cleveland. But the models for this kind of scrappy web-based investigating and crusading reporting are not found in the United States. The best example I know started 15 years ago in the Philippines, with almost no money and few readers in a society with a limited

internet audience. Which brings us back to Africa, where we are already seeing similar innovation and impact in digital media.

Finally, a word about the great theological debate between proponents and practitioners of “communications for development” and the advocates of “media development” – and the third set of observers who either straddle these two worlds, or insist that this is a distinction without a difference.

It is in Africa where this argument is most acute. And where it matters most.

This can be a sterile debate: Are we asking support for the development OF media, or of media FOR development? Well, some say, why not both? Aren't these both desirable goals? In an ideal world these should not be goals in conflict. And besides, there is unquestionably a great fuzzy grey space between the two. Some of the grey space is occupied by what some in the US have called ‘civic’ journalism, and which in a less academic age was known as muckraking or crusading journalism, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. And much of this kind of agenda-driven work is now the province of ‘citizen’s journalism’ through blogs and other means.

That grey area also includes the large subcultures of specialized reporters on key development issues – health, the environment, trade and economic growth in ‘emerging markets’ and so on – who are rarely value-neutral in their work, precisely because they are specialists. They understand that the main scientific debate on climate change, for example, is not whether it is real, or even whether humans are causing it, but on what to do about it.

Encouraging and even subsidizing more of this kind of specialized reporting is one quite legitimate aim of the ‘C4D’ movement. And what could be wrong with that? Supporting media for the sake of furthering equitable and sustainable development goals through mass communications tools should be in itself a good and desirable thing, and this should turn further the professionalization of the media, another desirable end in itself.

And most of us who have worked on development projects large and small wish that our donors and agencies would recognize that communications must be an integral aspect of any initiative aimed at lasting change.

So –end of argument, right? But it’s not that simple.

Most of us who come at this from the world of journalism believe that the fundamental goal of our media development work is to strengthen journalism – to promote and support independent newsgathering and independent editorial analysis and independent thinking in the public square as an end in itself. We see journalism in its historic if idealistic Fourth Estate role as a distinct and crucial institution for any democratic society.

And the Fourth Estate cannot be approached as some subset of “civil society” – even though there is an overlap with professional associations and media watchdog groups and so on – because its function is different (including monitoring NGOs just as it should government and business), and because its ownership structure stretches from the private sector to the state.

Nor should it be seen as something detached from the hurly-burly of partisan politics and ideological battles like some neutered priesthood. Journalism in the service of a cause is a venerable tradition: Impassioned editors and essayists in the United States led battles to abolish slavery, to give women the right to vote, and, long before that, to form a new upstart republic out of 13 small colonies.

These are differences that are worth understanding, and underlining, both from the perspective of those who are funding these initiatives, and from that of those who are actually doing the work. Not only do the motives of the projects and their patrons differ, so do their modalities of operations, and, increasingly, the “metrics” or indicators used to measure success.

A ‘media development’ approach to metrics would start with the big picture of the overall enabling environment for an effective and independent press - - everything from media law to broadcasting infrastructure to pluralism in views and ownership to the freedom of journalists to self-organize and self-regulate. The UN’s model for that exercise would be the detailed and comprehensive Media Development Indicators “Framework” developed by UNESCO and adopted in March by the intergovernmental board of the International Programme for the Development of Communications (IPDC). Equally useful, and complementary, are the diagnostic tools developed and tested in the real media world by IREX and Panos and others.

A ‘communications for development’ approach to project priorities or project effectiveness would tend instead to start with whatever non-media development goal was the ultimate objective of the exercise, be it a public

health campaign or an election or investments in alternative energy. Local realities of media freedom and infrastructure in this perspective would be taken largely as a given, with the challenge defined as how the news media and other communications channels as they exist in that society can be used as tools or partners in the pursuit of agreed development goals. News organizations may still benefit from such a partnership institutionally, but that would for donors be an ancillary benefit, not their core objective.

Take a journalists' training program in the coverage of public health issues like HIV or sanitation, or a country's progress (or lack of it) towards the Millennium Development Goals, or issues of racial prejudice or gender discrimination. If approached from a "C4D" standpoint, the resulting coverage of these issues is a means to end, and that end is constructive societal change, with the media serving as both an informational and advocacy tool. Fair enough. And the ultimate measure of the success is whether a) that change occurred, or has begun to occur, and b) if you can demonstrate a causal link with the media project, in terms of greater quality or quantity of news coverage of the subject, or whatever.

Again, fair enough. That was its purpose. And it is important to remember that journalism is just one arrow in the advocate's communications quiver – these seminars or briefings or training projects would typically be complemented by direct appeals to the populace through entertainment media, advertising, governmental channels, and other means.

Nothing wrong with that. And if the journalism training is done well it can certainly improve both the caliber of the coverage and the professional skills and subject mastery of the individual journalist, which is all very desirable.

Yet if the same projects were approached from the perspective of supporting independent media as its first priority, the test would be the quality of the coverage itself – whether it was characterized by first-hand reporting on the ground, by an informed skepticism, by a commitment to serious follow-up investigation, by the professional capacity and tenacity of the reporters following the story. Evaluating whether it directly caused constructive change would be a more nuanced exercise. An investigative journalist hopes that exposing wrongdoing by a public official will ultimately land that official in court or force the official out of office – yet even if a trial does not take place, and the corruption continues, the reporting was still well worth doing, because the truth was exposed and the public was informed.

Good journalists may end up questioning the cost-effectiveness of HIV treatment programs as compared to, for example, investing in malaria bed nets or in sanitation projects, when countries are faced with difficult decisions about the prioritization of finite resources. And donors and government might not appreciate that questioning, having expected instead a kind of earnest cheerleading for decisions already taken by the great and the good. Or journalists may raise uncomfortable questions about genetically modified crops, creating political difficulties for agricultural development programs that may be entirely justifiable scientifically and economically.

Another example is support for media as part of elections support packages, which is commonplace and which we all support. The goals of donors here typically lead to measurements like voter turnout, maybe by region or gender, the absence of ethnic or factional violence in the political campaigns, and the perceived legitimacy of the process as indicated in part by media reporting and acceptance of the official results as fact.

Journalists, however, would assess the success of election coverage more along these lines: Did we cover the candidates and issues fairly and thoroughly? Did our readers, viewers, listeners have the information they needed to make a reasoned judgment in the voting booth? Did we have enough access to the process to be able to judge whether the voting and vote-counting were conducted fairly and professionally? Were we manipulated by the politicians -- were we just megaphones for partisan claims and rhetoric? Or did we force them to be honest and accountable?

This different optics is not necessarily in conflict. But they are different.

There is a trend towards what some call “peace journalism,” with the explicit aim of supporting a national reconciliation process after a civil war or of combating animosities and prejudices across borders or ethnic lines that drive conflict. This often includes getting journalists from both sides of these divides to know one another and to better understand the perspective of the other community or country or religious group. And this can be very helpful in stopping self-perpetuating cycles of violence: the UN has supported such initiatives in such varied places as Lebanon, Cote d’Ivoire, El Salvador, and Palestine, where even slight progress is a triumph.

But: Conflict usually springs from real grievances, from genuine inequities, from mutually incompatible ideologies or territorial claims. Journalists have

not just the right but the obligation to explore these underlying issues— even when ignoring them might ease the way to a short-term truce or longer-term political solution. Journalists have to carefully weigh their roles and responsibilities in these historically delicate moments. But one factor in that equation has to be the awareness that being a propagandist for peace is just as contrary to the ethos of journalism as being a propagandist for war.

Journalists doing their job will always stir up debate, force explanations from policymakers about their decisions, drag hidden facts out into the sunlight, give public platforms to skeptics, demand accountability from all sides. This can make policymaking slow and contentious and messy.

That's not what governments or aid donors necessarily want.

The real danger is in those famous “metrics.” The HIV example I just described would be considered a success by most reporters and editors and journalism professors. But a C4D optic on HIV reporting workshops would more likely measure outcomes by tracking public awareness and support of the treatment programs and/or by elite backing for continuing the program.

Proving causality, and justifying what one does by causality, is not just difficult, not just a formula for pseudo-science and absurd claims of paternity for successes that had a hundred fathers. It is also often a philosophical trap, especially if the goal is journalism.

I am one of those who for years tried to ‘sell’ the cause of press freedom by arguing that it was essential for economic growth. I pointed to the need for the free flow of information in capital markets, the historic relationship between media pluralism and consumer capitalism, the Amartya Sen dictum about no country with a free press ever having suffered a famine, and so on.

It was an opportunistic argument, aimed at political and business leaders in countries emerging from authoritarianism in Latin America and Eastern Europe and Africa. And also at the IMF-World Bank crowd. But I believed that (as Kissinger said in another context) it had the additional advantage of being true. A decade ago I arranged to have the then-Deputy Treasury Secretary of the United States, Larry Summers, deliver that message in a speech to the leading journalists of Hong Kong shortly before the handover of the crown colony to Beijing. And what happened next?

The Chinese economy – still under tight state control from Beijing, but now including Hong Kong -- began growing at a world record pace of eight and nine then ten percent a year. That pace that has not yet slowed. If we posit an economic growth correlation with press freedom when the data is going our way, we have to be prepared to concede defeat when data suggests otherwise. So maybe a free press doesn't matter that much after all, at least to the goals of economic growth. Or public health. Or education. Maybe.

Which is why I prefer a 'rights-based' approach to media development and press freedom. This should certainly be the UN's point of departure. This is the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states in its famous Article 19 that all people everywhere have the right "to seek, impart and receive information and ideas, through any medium, regardless of frontiers" – (presciently anticipating the Internet, by the way). Making that promise a reality should be seen as a worthy end in itself.

Yes, an independent and empowered and professional news media will – most of us believe – contribute to equitable development and better governance and an improved quality of life on innumerable levels. And we should track if and how this happens, to the best of our ability. But we shouldn't get too hung up on proving it empirically.

One analogy that I find useful is women's rights. There is a whole library of development literature arguing quite persuasively that the single best investment one can make in long-term socio-economic development is in improving the status of women, and especially the status of young girls, ensuring that they get the same level of education and health care that boys do, and that as they grow up they have the same political and economic and cultural rights as men -- including the rights to own property and businesses and hold public office, and to choose if and when to have children. The results within a generation on an entire society are usually dramatic.

But suppose we could not demonstrate that causality. What if the evidence were ambiguous or contradictory? Or suppose the data showed that the effect of enforcing equal rights for women was socio-economically marginal, with less measurable impact than investments in potable water, or export manufacturing. Would we still work for women's rights? Of course we would. We would do so because it is the right thing to do, because it is a matter of elemental human rights and social justice, and the kind of society we want for our daughters and our sons as well. It's common sense.

And so it is with the free exchange of information and ideas, which requires independent media. Building a free press in poor developing countries will require assistance, just as with building public health and education systems. But it should be clear to all that the goal of journalism should be to seek and tell the truth, regardless of the consequences. And to examine all sides and all claims and all actors in public debates “without fear or favor.”

We have to recognize that those goals can come into conflict with development goals, millennial or otherwise. And that those goals can also lead to conflict with the host and donor governments and multilateral organizations providing that assistance – which is another reason they tend instinctively to prefer the “media for development” approach to the development of media. And this leads to different ways of defining and evaluating project ends and project means.

The gap between these two cultures can be bridged through journalism programs that remain true to the ethos of the profession and development projects that recognize the importance not just of “communications” but of democratic inquiry. But the first step is recognizing that this divide is real.

Media development must ultimately be aimed at strengthening the independence and professional standards and social impact of journalism. But if we are to win this argument, it is equally important for us to stress that media development is not for journalists alone, any more than improving health care is for the benefit of doctors. Media development has to be seen as an investment in a better society, in a more democratic future, for all citizens. And if we can then deploy our shiny new better-developed independent media in ways that will ultimately advance the social and economic development goals of society at large, everyone gains.

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