

WestAfrica

INSIGHT



MEDIA MATTERS IN WEST AFRICA



Centre for Democracy & Development

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INSIGHT

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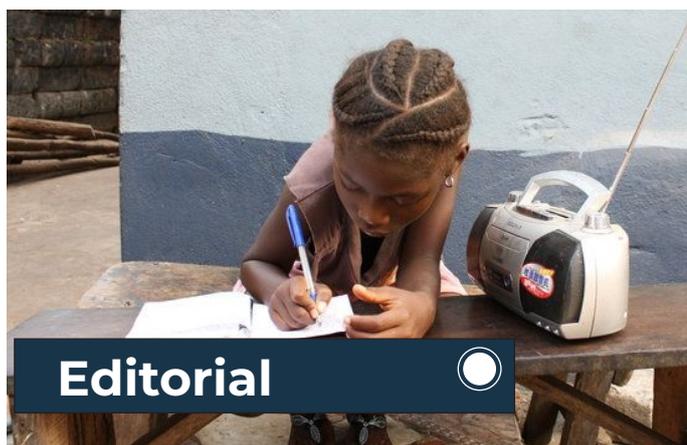
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EDITORIAL

This Issue: Media Matters in West Africa



This special issue of West Africa Insight offers reflections on the challenges facing the media industry and offers some initial thoughts and reflections about how they might be overcome.

Mercy Abang looks at models available to media houses in Nigeria that can allow them to develop more sustainable and less dependent business models without comprising on the independence and quality of the output. Drawing on research from Northern Ghana Yahaya Masahudu highlights the critical importance of indigenous

language radio to information flows and development in the region. Arguing that greater investment is needed to support this vital communication tool.

Finally Leanne de Bassompierre looks at recent efforts to advance fact-checking initiatives in Sierra Leone, highlighting the important role than they can play in countering the growing prevalence of fake news in the country.

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MEDIA MATTERS
IN WEST AFRICA



Making media viable in Nigeria

In August 2017, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and publisher of the now defunct 234 NEXT Newspaper, Mr Dele Olojede explained in an interview how the Nigerian political and economic business environment for media, led to the demise of his publication. Within months of kicking off its operations in 2004, the newspaper started publishing deep dives and hard hitting investigations on important national stories; exposing high-level corruption involving top government officials that most mainstream newspapers would have been unwilling to cover. But investigating high profile corruption in a state like Nigeria is not without its consequences.

Shortly after 234Next Newspaper started publishing these hard hitting stories, Mr Olejede said, “political and business elites were able to put pressure on my investors. Since they had most of their businesses in other sectors of the economy, whether it was oil or telecoms or banking and so on...so if they couldn't put pressure directly on me, they could put pressure on them, which they went on to do”. The intertwined nature of Nigeria's business and political elites is a challenge for media houses looking to build a sustainable business model that does not lead to compromises on the

stories they can investigate. In 2013 Next ceased publication because of these funding challenges.

Making a media organisation both profitable and credible is a challenge shared by entities across Nigeria and the West Africa sub-region. In an interview given to Deutsche Welle, in 2019 Daniel Nyakonah, the secretary general of the Press Union of Liberia explained that “if you dare to be critical and independent in a media economy where the government is the main provider of advertisement, you run the risk that they stop giving you ads and you slowly go under”. An estimated 80-90% of revenue generated by media companies is derived from adverts. Between 2006 and 2015 the newspaper industry in Nigeria raked in N143.1 billion (over US\$300 million) in advertising revenue alone. And Nigerian media houses need this revenue to survive.

Amber Olague the general manager of Nigeria's Independent Television in Abuja, a privately owned media organisation, highlighted to WAI the multitude of costs that exist beyond paying staff. There is “the cost of licence, multiple taxation, nonsubsidised equipment and also the cost of power, with the hike in electricity tariffs”.



Credible and sustainable?

Motunrayo Alaka, the executive director and chief executive officer of the Wole Soyinka Center acknowledges that the challenge of maintaining professional independence whilst also generating revenue that makes media operations sustainable remains a significant challenge in Nigeria. "Getting revenue right is so important for the media because it directly affects the independence of the media, you cannot talk about media independence if the media cannot pay its own bills, if it has to depend on the same politicians for it to be sustainable, it becomes difficult for the media to be able to hold government accountable".

Some media organisations in Nigeria - like NewsWireNGR, The International Centre for Investigative Reporting, Sahara Reporters and Premium Times - are heavily dependent on grants to fund their operations and investigative reporting. But this is more of a supplementary not a sustainable or guaranteed source of income. If media houses are to raise their own revenue, outside of subscribers, they must tread a fine line between operating more as a business and offering the public service they are expected to do. Alaka maintains that the media needs to

approach public relations (PR) as a revenue opportunity. "PR is a need, but you also need to be ethical enough to separate it from professional work" she told WAI. When engaging in this type of work the media needs to be "clear about what is not for sale".

Clearly separating editorial and business teams and having some structure and rules about the way you generate your revenue that limits how it affects your editorial judgements is important in this mixed model. "I don't think media houses should completely rely on advertisements, I think that we should add a mix bag, paywall, advertisements, funding – doing a lot of not for profits news, hosting of events and designing bespoke contents" says Akala. She remains unconvinced that the subscription model can work for a broad audience in Nigeria given the low purchasing power of the average Nigerian and even the difficulties many have in accessing the internet. However, she admits it can be a success if the contents are of a high quality. "I believe that people will pay, and they will pay for paywalls, if the content is worth it and if it's able to tell stories" she told WAI.

A new model

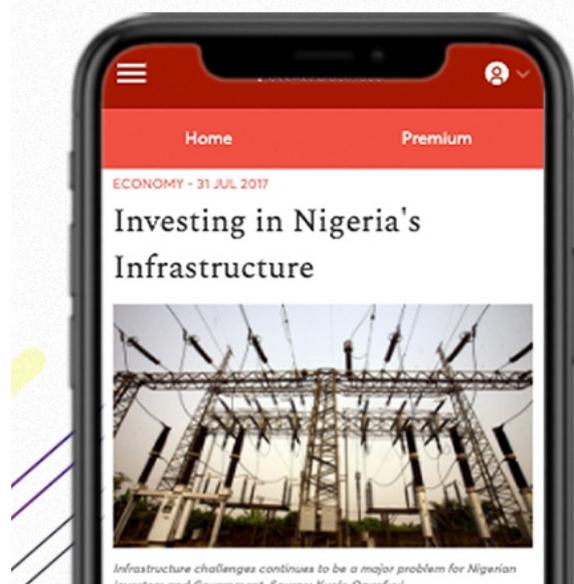
When Stears Business started publishing in 2017 the company's focus was mainly on producing articles; there was neither a business model nor was there sufficient revenue being generated to make it profitable. Founder and CEO, Preston Timeyin says that “while we were publishing, we always had our mind towards data, and the big data market that you see still exists in Nigeria and in Africa, so, for a long time, we didn't also need Stears Business to be revenue generating – primarily because we were just trying to figure out what kind of business model was required to play in the data space”.

During the 2019 elections in Nigeria, the team developed a real-time election data centre. The company was also providing, at a cost, aggregated financial, economic and corporate data and analytics to market watchers and business professionals. But a lot of the individuals and companies who purchased the data found the company through its articles. According to Timeyin, “the reason a lot of people come to us is because of what they see us publish on Stears business”. That included investors. In April 2020, Stears raised \$600,000 in seed funding from Luminate, a philanthropic organisation founded by the Omidyar Group. This has enabled them to hire a full-time editor-in-chief and to substantially expand the offering of their newsroom.

“Stears is online-first, an example of a new generation of media companies that is challenging the traditional model of heavy advertising dependency and analogue newsrooms by monetising their editorial, data, and research expertise” wrote Luminate in a statement. But most of its content remains behind a pay-wall – a monthly subscription is N4,000 (US\$10) - a further effort to ensure the organisations fiscal sustainability. Without disclosing details of the company's subscription numbers, Stears has a successful subscriber base that Timeyin says is “paying bills” and that has the “potential to pay a lot of bills”.

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Despite arguments that the purchasing power of a lot of Nigerians discourages them from subscribing for paid services, the idea that every single article has a cost of production that should be borne by the people who consume it is a sentiment Stears have built their model on. By prioritising quality, the company can also be seen to be contributing to rebuilding public trust in the media in Nigeria, while simultaneously building up a cohort of talented young writers contributing



A brighter future?

A proposed amendment to Section 3 (d) of the 1992 Nigerian Press Council Act that would enable the council to penalise media houses, including revocation of licenses, with the approval of the minister, was recently debated in the legislature. Proposed revisions to Section 17(3) of the Act would also make journalists themselves liable for failing to adhere to the council's decisions. Amendments are also being proposed to the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC) – the regulator – that would require all online media entities to get NBC approval before being allowed to operate. The discussion of these bills in the National Assembly led Nigeria's leading print dailies to declare an information blackout, with their front pages all containing the same image of a face made from newspapers clippings, with a gagged mouth as part of advocacy efforts to push back against the proposed legislation.

Equally bold action is needed when it comes to Nigeria's media industry if organisations are to find

The increasing digitisation of news in Nigeria can provide a new avenue for finding that balance ”

ways to raise revenue that is significant, sustainable, and that does not impinge on their ability to go after a story. The increasing digitisation of news in Nigeria can provide a new avenue for finding that balance but the quest for income must not impinge on media efforts to uphold truth and accountability.

Mercy Abang is an award winning journalist. She has a MBA in Entrepreneurship from the Berlin School of Innovation and Business and is currently an editor with Hostwriter's Unbias the News

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CRUCIAL COMMUNICATION: INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE RADIO IN NORTHERN GHANA

Ghana's media space has seen remarkable progress since the country returned to democratic rule in 1993. Prior to this period the country had experienced a chequered history of media freedom in the independence era. Until 1996, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), was the only radio station allowed to broadcast in the country.

The 1992 constitution contains the most elaborate articulation of provisions aimed at ensuring the freedom and independence of the media. In guaranteeing the freedom and independence of the media, the constitution provides, among other things, that there shall be no impediments to the establishment of private media. Consequent to these provisions, private FM radio stations started emerging in the late 1990s. By mid-2020, the National Communications Authority (NCA), the body in charge of authorising licenses for the establishment of electronic media, recorded 428 FM stations in operation across the country.

An evolving space

Until 1996 people of the Northern Region relied only on the state broadcaster, Radio Ghana, for indigenous language content. But on 2 December 1996, the first ever FM station in the Northern Region – GBC Radio Savannah - was birthed. The

main objective of establishing Radio Savannah was to promote the then government's functional literacy programme. It was overseen by the collaborative efforts of the GBC and the non-formal education division of the Ministry of Education.

GBC Radio Savannah broadcast in English, Dagbanli and Gonja. The excitement of the people, as narrated by Sheikh Yakubu Abdul Karim, credited as the first person to read Dagbanli news on the station, was seen in the audience's commitment and enthusiasm to participate in the station's programmes and activities. Soon after the arrival of Radio Savannah, the establishment of private FM stations in the Northern Region started in earnest. By mid-2020, the Northern Region had 22 FM stations in operation according to NCA. The increasing number of radio stations has also led to an increase in the number of indigenous languages used on radio.

Besides the liberalisation of the airwaves, the exponential growth in the number of radio stations has also seen an improvement in information and communication technology and the gradual shift of development initiatives towards a more participatory approach.

Important impacts

According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, the literacy rate in the Northern Region was 37% compared to a national literacy rate of 74%. With this high rate of illiteracy, the importance of indigenous language radio is clear. Radio also remains the most popular and most accessible source of news in Ghana according to a 2018 Afrobarometer survey. The ease of access to radio even for rural dwellers makes it an effective tool to influence the behaviours and beliefs of people.

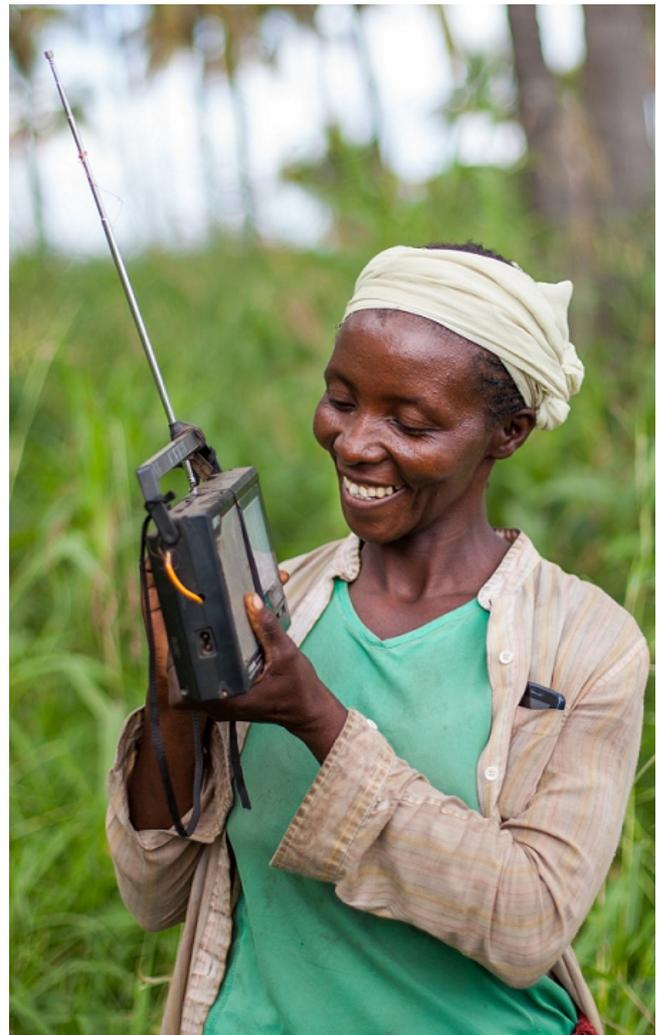
Indigenous language radio has been used over the years to educate farmers on improved methods of farming and to address their concerns. Farmers take lessons from radio programmes and have used the same platforms to reach out to authorities and experts to have their issues addressed. Amadu Malik, host of “Kpariba Saha” (Farmers Time) programme on Radio Savannah says the lack of extension services for farmers in some rural communities in the Northern region affects their productivity. But that educational radio programming has significant benefits, “a lot of farmers have improved their yield because of the education we give them on radio.”

Abdulai Sumani, a farmer and listener to Malik's programme agrees, “the education they give us on the programme has been very beneficial. We were ignorant about some of the farming practices, and this affected our output. We used to get two to three bags of maize per acre but with the knowledge we've acquired from the programme, we now get between 15 and 20 bags per acre” he told WAI.

Health programmes on nutrition, maternal and child care, personal and environmental hygiene have also richly benefitted populations in the Northern Region. Reductions in maternal and child mortality, guinea worm eradication and improvement in the general well-being of the people can be partly attributed to relentless campaigns broadcast on indigenous language radio by both governmental and non-governmental entities. In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, indigenous language radio has become

even more indispensable. It serves as a convenient and effective medium for delivering awareness campaigns and information about COVID-19 safety protocols to residents using a language and medium they trust and understand.

The use of indigenous language on radio has also enhanced people's participation in public discourse. Indigenous language radio has been used to explain government policies to the people and to discuss important national issues with listeners able to share their views through popular phone-in segments. Information flow to the people and from the people has become very fluid, and much faster, as a result of the proliferation of indigenous language radio stations.





Newsroom challenges

Despite their importance, indigenous language newsrooms in Northern Ghana are confronted with a myriad of challenges that limit their capacity to function effectively in producing and broadcasting news. Indigenous language newsrooms receive little attention from managers and owners of FM stations in the region in terms of provision of logistics and remuneration of staff. As a result, some indigenous language newsrooms are forced to rely on stories published on websites belonging to media houses in Accra to 'report' news. Translating news stories comes with risks that the meaning can be distorted, deliberately or unintendedly.

Alhaji Adam Kokra, the first Regional Director of CBC Radio Savannah blames the low investment in indigenous language newsrooms on the inability of the stations to generate enough revenue.

"It is not the fault of the owners per se. The market is very small and advertisements are very few, so they are not capable of earning enough in order to put in something more for their stations to be competitive".

As a result of the low investment in indigenous language newsrooms, the FM stations are not able

to attract competent and qualified personnel to work in the newsrooms to deliver quality content. As Mathew Zaabille, manager at PAD FM in Damongo in the Savannah region, explained to WAI;

"Apart from me we don't have a single journalist. So, we must depend on senior high school graduates and give them inhouse training. We also organise workshops for them to build their capacity. We don't have the money to engage professionals".

This is because the media houses offer few, if any benefits to employees. Hamida Mutaru Adam who previously worked for Fiila FM and now reads Dagbanli news on Sagani TV, bemoans the lack of or low remuneration of indigenous newsroom staff and believes that media owners must, at least, provide the needed logistics for reporters, "most of the media owners don't want to pay people. When they pick you, they don't want to pay you, they expect you to use your own money to do whatever you need to do and at the end of the day when the money comes, they are the only ones who benefit".



Innovate to survive

Though many FM stations compete for the small market in the area, media owners and managers will be able to generate enough revenue to run the stations efficiently if they are more innovative.

For instance, through research radio stations can identify important issues of interest to the people and organise events. These events have the potential to attract more businesses and corporate institutions to provide sponsorship. Apart from revenue generated from sponsorship, the stations can also generate revenue from the advertising and marketing of such events.

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Another way radio stations can generate more revenue is by diversifying their investments. Rather than rely solely on the limited advertisements in the region, the stations can invest in farming, for example, to improve their revenue generation. If the business(es) succeeds, the stations will be better placed financially to attract qualified and competent staff and become more sustainable.

This is important because indigenous language radio has a crucial role to play in the continued development of Ghana's Northern Region.



Making sense of rumours? Fact-checking in Sierra Leone

At the start of the Ebola pandemic, many Sierra Leoneans would wake up in the middle of the night to bath in salt water and pray, believing they would be saved from the haemorrhagic fever that eventually killed more than 11,000 people across West Africa.

Locals in Sierra Leone had received the information through the WhatsApp message service, purportedly from Nigerian pastor T.B. Joshua, who later denied its authenticity and brandished it as fake news. One of the major reasons for the rapid spread of the virus through Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone was a lack of trust in the governments of these worst-affected countries and what they communicated around it. An Afrobarometer survey towards the end of the crisis showed that most Sierra Leoneans saw a drop in their economic and living conditions, and disapproved of their government performance in running the country during the crisis.

Fast forward to 2020, amid the global coronavirus pandemic Sierra Leone was a little more prepared in its dissemination of news around the virus. Though the West African nation has only reported 6,247 cases and 119 death as of 28 July, according to

the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, early efforts to provide clear information around Covid-19, a lesson learned from the Ebola response, and measures to stem the spread of the coronavirus, quickly bore fruit. It introduced a state of emergency on 24 March 2020, to deal with the virus, before it had even declared its first case. It also closed the country's borders, imposed restrictions of overseas travel for government officials and banned public gatherings.

Tackling the 'infodemic'

"We partnered with the European Union last year to debunk fake news and misinformation around the national fight against Covid-19, by setting up a broadcast that simulcast our programmes through a network of over 70 radio stations across the country," Ahmed Sahid Nasralla, President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, told WAI. "There were also health experts and government officials in studio to respond to questions from the public", he said.

To be sure, the country has not been fake news free. In March 2020 the wife of a journalist died of a heart attack on her way to collect her children from school when news spread that they were due to be vaccinated on the premises. At that juncture there was no vaccine in production and Sierra Leone was still to record its first case.

Whilst WhatsApp and Facebook remain the main conduits for the spread of fake news in the country, journalists in Sierra Leone, have made a great effort in recent years to not fall prey to the scourge. In doing that they have slowly improved the standards and quality of journalism in the country where the first newspaper in West Africa, the Sierra Leone Gazette, was first published back in 1801. But presidential elections in 2018 were “marred by politically motivated fake news, misinformation and propaganda” according to Nasrallah. This was the impetus behind fact-checking projects that have bloomed since.

Countering falsehoods with facts

Dubawa, a leading West African fact-checking organisation, opened offices in Freetown in July 2021. It has already countered a social media message circulating in Sierra Leone that Covid-19 emergency relief is available to families, which it says is “characteristic of similar messages that dominate social media asking users to share clickable content”. After carefully analysing the link in the messages, Dubawa could not associate it with any recognised organisation or institution. It also verified the claims with government that dismissed it as a “so-called” fund.

Dubawa is the brainchild of leading Nigerian media scholar and veteran journalist Dapo Olorunyami, who is the editor-in-chief and



publisher of online publication Premium Times, one of Nigeria's most trusted news sources and executive director of the offshoot Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism. Founded in 2014 its mission is to promote a truly independent media landscape that advances fundamental human rights, good governance and accountability in West Africa through investigative journalism, open data and civic technology. “Fact-checking is the vaccine that journalism needs to improve and strengthen its role in debunking falsehoods that society is confronted with on a daily basis,” said Olorunyomi after leading a Dubawa training session with 26 journalists from five West African nations recently.

For Sierra Leonean media commentator and digital literacy advocate Vickie Remoe, who has witnessed the evolution of the spread of fake news over the last few years, most people who get their news through WhatsApp and Facebook still “don't have the knowledge to verify that what they've read is true”. Highlighting that “digital literacy and access is still low” in many parts of the country. Internet penetration was 12.8% in December 2020, with an estimated 833,400 Facebook users. But given that the government sees digital as key to its future having drawn up a comprehensive strategy through 2029, creating better informed online citizens should be a priority.

Leanne de Bassompierre is a South African journalist based in Abidjan covering West Africa, mainly for Bloomberg.

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