

African media renaissance needed

By  Danette Breitenbach

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In the [Reporters without Borders 2022 edition](#) of the World Press Freedom Index, out of 180 countries, the best ranked African country is Namibia (18th), followed by South Africa (35th). The worst-ranked country is Eritrea (179th), then Egypt (168th), Djibouti (164th), Sudan (151th) and Libya (143th).



Source: ©Reporters without borders [rsf](#) Journalism is under digital siege and physical threat. In May 14 journalists were arbitrarily detained by the authorities of Somaliland

The report says that the effects of a globalised and unregulated online information space have encouraged fake news and propaganda, which has had disastrous effects on news and information.

Journalism under digital siege and physical threat

This year, on 3 May, World Press Freedom Day highlighted this under the theme [Journalism under Digital Siege](#).

The latest Unesco World Trends Report Insights discussion paper [Threats that Silence: Trends in the Safety of Journalists](#) highlights the multiple ways in which journalism is endangered by surveillance and digitally-mediated attacks on journalists and the consequences of all this on public trust in digital communications.



#WorldPressFreedomDay: Restoring public trust in journalism

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The report also highlighted the physical dangers journalists are facing today.

For the period 2016–2020 Unesco recorded 400 killings of journalists. While the Report says this is a nearly 20% decrease from the previous five-year period, unabated levels of impunity for these cases correlate with increases in imprisonment and other attacks.

“This daunting combination, including online violence, spurs self-censorship,” says the Report.

“The weaker the media the more vulnerable it becomes to being captured by interests, not in its favour,” says Guy Berger, director of Division Freedom of Expression and Media Development, Unesco.

Reclaiming African journalism in the public interest

Berger was attending the recent World Press Freedom Day Global Conference, held from 2 to 5 May, in Punta del Este, Uruguay, which he attended with delegates from 86 countries.

He joined other panel members in a virtual discussion entitled: *Reclaiming African Journalism in the Public Interest* at the commemoration of World Press Freedom Day recently, hosted by the Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies (JMS), in partnership with *The Journalist*, *the Mail & Guardian*, and *Highway Africa*.

The panel also included Lydia Namubiro, editor for *The Continent*, based in Ghana, Jovial Rantao, journalist, editor and chairperson of the African Editors Forum and Kavita Chandran, a journalist and media trainer who has worked for *Reuters*, *Bloomberg* and *CNBC*, based in Singapore. Taryn de Vega, research and academic at JMS moderated the panel.

A roadblock for African journalism

“The last two years we have seen a real roadblock for African journalism and media,” says Berger, who was the head of the JMS before taking up his current position at Unesco.

He maintains that it is the rise of the digital age has placed journalism on the back foot. “As these platforms continue to gain advertising and media continues to lose revenue, media, including African media, will find it difficult to compete with these platforms,” he says.

He adds that today’s media need skills such as data scientists if they are to compete, but most media on the continent can ill afford these.

“Africa also has a low density of journalists, with Covid and lockdown further reducing advertising leading to job losses and news content downgrades. Donor media declines can also be added to the list, as funding moves to refugees fleeing the Ukraine Russian war crisis.

“Donor funded media in Africa is already being hard hit,” he says.

“The result of all these factors are, that weaker the media, the more vulnerable it becomes to being captured by interests, not in its favour, and this puts press freedom at risk,” he adds.





An African solution for Africa

Jovial Rantao highlights the plight of journalists and their safety.

“It is alarming the risk that African journalists place themselves under, facing discrimination, even sexual threat and murder,” he says.

He adds it is oppressive governments have led to the detention and arrests of journalists, some even using Covid as cover to restrict journalism.

“The solution to a sustainable media for the public good in Africa must come from Africa itself. The continent’s media must own the African narrative by finding ways to make African media viable,” he says.

“We are being called on to change the African media model; what we need is a renaissance movement,” he adds.

Lydia Namubiro agrees.

“If you think of history and the big events that define moments in time, it is the context of those big events that characterise an era. Small things on their own are not that spectacular, but the sum of them adds to our resilience. It is many small acts of creativity and stubbornness that will give us our African renaissance,” she says.

“Public interest journalism is journalism learnt by doing. You get a sense of it over the years by way of practice; you get a sense of it by occupying space and being invested in a particular community over time.

“African journalism in the public interest is journalism that is done by African journalists,” she adds.

Sustainable journalism

“If the media want the public on their side, then sustainable journalism could be a way forward,” Berger suggests.

He believes that the strong culture of volunteering money, for example to their churches, on the continent, could be channelled to media.

“Sustainable journalism, also termed solutions journalism, focuses on reporting on environmental, sustainable, economic and social issues as well as the successes and abuses in African countries,” he explains.

“The idea is that by reporting on these issues it will link the media more closely to their audiences, who will, in turn, support the media, leading to a more sustainable media.

“However, while Africans are resilient and refuse to be cowered, often finding ways forward through the most difficult of circumstances, the way forward looks grim,” he acknowledges.

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.
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