

# Innovation is the core in Africa

By [Trevor Ncube](#)

6 Jun 2007

African editors and publishers need swift and smart thinking in order to withstand persecution in countries with prickly presidents and parliaments. When state adverts dry up, usually on order from on-high, new business models have to be invented on-the-fly.



Trevor Ncube at WAN. Picture courtesy of the Zoopy.com team

Nimble incentivising is needed when vendors cut circulation by renting out papers to readers, rather than selling them.

Lobbying against import tax on newsprint, electricity failures, and unfair competition from state-owned media – it's all a necessary part of the African media game.

Add to these challenges, the factors of technology change and convergence, and it's clear why African media leaders are intrinsically specialists in adapting and adopting.

Life wasn't always like this in Africa. Just as the global newspaper industry got taken by surprise when a global IT company took a bite of their advertising, so Africans awoke one day to find that colonialism had claimed their birthright.

And just as contemporary newspapers with websites experience piracy by outsiders, so too have Africans long been victims of pillage. The result: we became masters in resisting the rip-offs.

## Defeatism not the tradition

Early African nationalists took up newspapers as tools to help win independence, beginning with Ghana's freedom in 1957. Defeatism is not in the tradition of this continent.

Unfortunately, 150 years of colonialism left many archaic laws on sedition and insult, kept in service by later rulers who should know better. Yet even this hasn't stopped independent newspapers from surviving against the odds. Being adept and

agile are watchwords for the African newspaper experience.

More recently, our papers are engaging positively with technical developments, turning these into a boon for our businesses:

- We're leap-frogging into advanced content management systems to serve our burgeoning newspaper markets.
- The online African diaspora – including within Africa itself – is a viable market for our web publishing.
- Accommodating citizen journalism is proceeding apace.
- Few continents exploit interactivity, especially via cellphone messaging, as much as our multi-lingual audiences.

However, it's our central plank – the hard-copy newspaper – that still sustains our enterprises. There remains huge hunger for the physical press. As our literacy, urbanisation and income levels continue to rise, so too will our sales flourish... provided there's the media freedom to do so.

Indeed, independent newspapers in Africa continue to be at the forefront of free speech across the continent. In this regard, we are no different from societies with much more media density. And, in an age of globalisation, setbacks in our media freedom can have severe repercussions for everyone else.

For example, concerns about police using cellphone records to identify journalists' sources are as real for us as for our counterparts anywhere else.

### **Common global family**

The point is that although there are differences between newspaper forms and fortunes around the world, the press remain a common global family – with African experience contributing inspiration about innovation.

So, bring on the blogging and Web 2.0 – and threats of electronic espionage on journalists. The global newspaper industry, including its African contingent, is ready.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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