

Building the media Africa needs

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There has never been a greater hunger for information in Africa than now. A better educated, more prosperous and young population are eager for facts and opinions about everything from politics to the latest music. They want the chance to shape their own futures.

We have seen, too, a dramatic growth of sources of information to feed this appetite. The internet and social media now provide an incredible wealth of facts and views and, increasingly, photographs and videos which can be accessed rapidly from wherever you are.

As a business person, I need to be aware of the social and political forces driving African economies. This information revolution is transforming every aspect of our lives, giving citizens more power, expanding consumer choice and helping hold politicians and business leaders to account. Social media and a new army of citizen journalists have been credited with driving democratic revolutions in North Africa and with creating new consumer trends and influencers.

In an era where everyone can now post news or share their opinions, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing the role of the traditional media and their trained journalists have become less valuable. But, in many ways they have become even more important. With so much unchecked information, there is a desperate need for a respected, independent voice to identify what matters among the noise and chaos on the web and help make sense of what we are reading or watching.

This is certainly the case in Africa where the diversity, vibrancy and strength of the traditional media has been a major factor in the continent's recent success story. New newspapers and broadcasting stations have sprung up in many countries to inform and entertain. By highlighting success and identifying problems, newspapers in particular have helped foster national debate, inform policy making, monitor government performance and drive up standards.

But if journalism has never been more important, it is also under increased pressure. In comparison with Europe and North America, newspaper circulations remain high but there is, in many places, the same squeeze on revenues. As a result, we are not always seeing the investment in journalists' training nor the salaries needed to retain experience.

And while freedom of the press may be guaranteed legally, the reality on the ground can be very different. Governments can view media criticism of what they are doing as against the national interest. Newspapers are pressurized into toeing a party line. Journalists can face obstruction, harassment and even worse.

This is not, of course, the picture across the whole of the continent.

It should be a matter of pride that Ghana, Cape Verde and Namibia ranked in the top 30 places in the 2013 global league table of press freedom drawn up by Reporters Without Borders. But there must also be concern that many African countries also saw the biggest falls in the index.

It is not, of course, due to any lack of committed or talented young journalists as even a quick read of some of the continent's major papers shows. But they can lack the sustained investment and training needed to make the most of their potential.

It was to help close this training gap that the David Astor Journalism Awards Trust was set up. Named in honour of David Astor who combined a distinguished career as a British newspaper editor with a lifetime commitment to social justice and Africa, the awards offer a tailored programme of training, work placements and support for talented young print journalists. At our company, SABMiller, we agreed that this is an essential project and felt compelled to give our support.

Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda - three countries with well-established media infrastructures - were chosen as the starting countries for the awards.

For the last five years, three young journalists with exceptional promise from these countries have been selected. This year's winners will be announced shortly.

As part of their prize, award winners spend three months working at some of the UK and South Africa's leading papers to help them in the development of their careers. Each year as well, past and present winners are brought together to share ideas and experiences. We are already seeing this network provide mentoring support for a new generation following in their footsteps.

But while the work of the trust is important, it is clearly not enough. There needs to be a wider recognition - and support - for the value of strong, independent journalism across the continent.

This can require political and business leaders to focus on the long-term gain rather than short-term frustrations. By valuing and understanding the opinions of the communities in which we work, businesses can grow and ensure that our success benefits as many people as possible.

But by monitoring performance and results, acting as a watchdog and by fostering national debate, good journalism is crucial in ensuring countries identify the problems that must be overcome and help find solutions. The societies which have the confidence to harness this power for good will be those which best build on Africa's incredible progress over the last decade.

Source: [allAfrica](#)

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