



Guest editors' introduction to the special issue on news media development and sustainability in Africa

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Free and independent information media are fundamental for both the economic and democratic development of countries (Sanjukta, 2014). In Africa, and particularly in conflict zones, international donors and non-profit organisations mainly support media development. They provide initial investments to help stabilise countries and support their transition towards democracy or out of war. After a certain level of success is perceived, donors and organisations either lower their support or withdraw completely. The sustainability of media in the long run is therefore one of the biggest problems for developing democracies to solve (Cook, 2016).

Furthermore, donor interventions have emphasised training, but much less so the development of strategies and the creation of institutionalised structures for educating journalists, media business managers, and audience researchers over the long term (Fojo, 2012; Kariithi, 2002; Susman-Pena, 2012). Among the five objectives that according to the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) media sustainability index are deemed to enable a media system to be independent and sustainable, the one measuring if “media are well managed, allowing editorial independence” scores the lowest for African countries. In terms of management, the ability to properly develop human resources and understand internal stakeholders' concerns seems to be one of the biggest shortcomings for media managers (Steyn & Steyn, 2010). Filling this gap could stimulate employees' motivation to engage in the achievement of media organisations' goals and objectives. This calls for a new approach to African journalism both in terms of financial support as well as educational programmes, and a shift in media development efforts can already be traced. In 2012, UNESCO paved the way by revisiting its model curriculum for journalism education in developing countries. The new curriculum aims at providing knowledge about how to improve the environment in which journalists and media firms operate and engage in strategies that promote media sustainability (Picard, 2015; Unesco Report, 2013). This is a first step; however, the impact that the deployed support measures can have on media sustainability is still unclear and is thus worth exploring.

Africa is a huge continent with 54 countries, more than 500 different languages, and a rapidly developing telecommunications network infrastructure. The cost of infrastructure and technology is often inaccessible, in particular for rural areas that remain mostly unconnected. Within this context, the development and sustainability of independent media is neither granted nor an easy task. Foreign direct investment can be of help, however, in which form and with what consequences? Further, a diversified coverage of topics and sources, both domestic and foreign, should be ensured to provide news consumers with a plurality of perspectives (Coyne & Leeson, 2004). In the last few years, we have seen quite a few established media firms from developed countries expand their business activities in Africa (Le Monde Afrique, Ringier, Canal+, Lagardère, Slate, Quartz, BBC, Bloomberg just to name a few). These actions potentially foster media pluralism and transparency on one hand, as well as innovation and economic development on the other hand. However, in order to ensure a truly pluralistic perspective on the African continent, the existence of sustainable and independent local media is needed.

A first discussion between researchers and practitioners in the field around this topic took place at an international conference on media development and sustainability held at the University of Neuchâtel on 22–23 October 2015. The first conference day focused on research and gathered scholars coming from various African countries as well as from Europe, the US, and Asia. The day after prominent journalists, media professionals, representatives of nongovernmental organisations, and researchers intervened and mainly discussed on economic and educational issues related to media development and sustainability. Debates were very enthusiastic and engaged. Some extracts of the contributions to the conference as well as the audio files of the speeches are available on the following website: <http://www.unine.ch/africamedia/home.html>

The aim of the conference was to shed light on how media are developing in different parts of Africa by identifying (a) the main constraints and enablers in this process and (b) the factors that might help bridge financial and human capital gaps and strengthen the impact of international support on media sustainability. The recent expansion of Western media companies in Africa offered also the opportunity to reflect on the impact that an emerging continent like Africa can have on the business model not only of African media but also of Western media. Research results pointed out that for instance, in Nigeria (a) the broadcasting media sector is predominantly controlled by government-owned enterprises, which are the only ones to have a national coverage; (b) print media are mostly privately owned, but investors often have vested interests in national politics or close ties with political leaders in the country; (c) a nationally structured network of distribution for daily newspapers is absent; and (d) the advertising market is characterised by a high buyers' concentration. These issues limit competition and media pluralism as well as professionalism and the sustainability of an independent news media system. Discussions also revealed that in many African countries media and journalism programmes at universities are not in line with the reality of media convergence and the needs of an evolving digital media industry. In Southern Africa the context is, however, different. Journalism programmes have responded by setting up New Media Labs and encouraged students to pursue research on digital media and its implications for various media platforms and outlets. Further, in South Africa, Zambia and Namibia community media have led to the access to local and international information for communities that are not in the urban centers. Scholars at the Conference also highlighted the success of some community media in Uganda and Tanzania, and argued that focusing on local language programming and community agendas might be the key for the sustainability of independent African media, once donors' funding withdraws. Unfortunately, the advertising market is far from being developed in other African countries, especially for local community media, audience research is lacking, and journalism schools do not offer any local language-based programmes.

This special issue of the *Journal of Media Business Studies* draws on a selection of papers presented at the aforementioned conference. The first paper by Gade, Nduka and Dastgeer addresses the delicate issue of the "brown envelope syndrome", the widespread practice of accepting money for news coverage. According to the authors, the "brown envelope syndrome" hinders the development of free, independent, and sustainable media. In order to curtail it, they propose a theoretical model for developing an institutional infrastructure for professional journalism. This model provides a collaborative framework for media and non-media actors that is supposed to strengthen the professionalism of journalistic work through dedicated educational programmes, professional associations' initiatives as well as media management practices that promote journalistic values and incentivise as well as reward best practices.

In 2012, Africa received 28% of the total amount spent on media development (Cauhapé-Cazaux and Kalathil, 2015). This funding came from a variety of sources, including established countries members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC)

as well as emerging donors such as China. In her paper “Media development, DAC countries and China: Different approaches, same public diplomacy” Valerie Cooper compares the approaches to media and development promoted by DAC countries and China. She shows how, through the front of media development aid, different ideologies have led these actors to pursue similar public diplomacy objectives and political interventions. According to the author’s analysis, global development is only in part an aim of the donating countries, the goals of nation branding and promotion being their priority. It might seem that any sort of aid to media development is a win for the recipient countries, Cooper concludes though that more attention should be paid to how the general public – and not simply the governments – can actually benefit from a better equipped and more diverse media landscape. The author further suggests that all parties – DAC countries, China, and Africa – would be better served if media practitioners rather than politicians discuss on what each country’s media system needs.

As mentioned earlier, the South African experience is very different with the country having a public service media system as well as media oligopolies primarily in the print and satellite television sectors. In the case of other African countries, it cannot be denied that, with the gradual dilution of state monopoly on broadcasting, international donors’ support contributed to the emergence of new commercial and community-based media organisations. However, besides following their promotional agenda, international donors usually consider their support as seed money. After an initial phase donors expect media outlets to have established structures, programmes, and routines and thus withdraw their support. This is based on the idea that media need to be independent in order to enhance accountability and transparency. Unfortunately, research shows that most local media cannot generate sufficient revenues from advertising or other sources, and without donor support they can hardly survive. In this concern, Spurr and Dingerkus analyse the case of local radio stations in Tanzania. Their results show that a viable media business model requires simultaneous efforts in the development of (a) quality content, (b) media management capacities, and (c) media research covering the extent and satisfaction of local audiences in order to allow local advertising markets to develop and serve local media.

The last paper of this special issue reveals a further problem that concerns community radios, a special type of local media facilitating community ownership and participation. In their quest for a sustainable business model community radios are opening up to different types of revenue sources – among which is also advertising. This is of course critical for replacing short-term donors support and ensuring the organisations’ sustainability. However, community radios need also to respect the epistemological frame of community participation and independence from political and market influences. By analysing the case of ATL FM in Ghana, Michael Serwornoo shows how a market-oriented management style, by increasing the sustainability and financial independence of the radio, is not only compatible with the epistemological frame but can even reinforce it.

These four papers present different perspectives of media development on the African continent and an opportunity to dig deeper into some of the challenges that media organisations are facing in their quest to develop and survive. However, if Gade, Nduka and Dastgeer suggest a theoretical model to promote best media management practices and develop journalistic professionalism, empirical evidence to test the viability of that model is needed. Further, if focusing on local media seems to be a critical success factor to address the different needs of a multitude of small communities, it is still unclear how media organisations can scale their business within this context. Finally, it appears clear that advertising is a fundamental component of media revenue models in Africa, but measures to address and broadly develop the advertising market and thus finance independent media are still lacking. These very issues are pointing to evident and wide research gaps in the field

of media development, business, and sustainability in Africa. We hope that this special issue will raise enthusiasm for the topic and thus stimulate further research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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