Surviving the Pandemic
The Struggle for Media Sustainability in Africa

By Dapo Olorunyomi

At the end of May 2020, about 23 media organizations in Nigeria announced that their staff would face layoffs, significant pay cuts, or both. One especially disturbing facet of this dire statement was that the biggest and apparently strongest newsrooms in the country were at the forefront of this announcement.

The precipitating event was the COVID-19 pandemic, which ravaged the revenue base of the media and for which there was no end in sight. The three principal legs of most Nigerian media organizations' business model—advertisements, sales, and events—went into freefall. To make matters worse, there was no serious support from anywhere else in the country. In the 1970s, Nigeria had had a blossoming, government-funded media ecosystem (radio, print, and television) at the subnational level, supporting national and international news reporting with information for local listeners, readers, and viewers, but today these sources are almost all dead. The range of business models that had supported the media in Nigeria has atrophied and is now badly in need of innovation.

Yet to call this dispiriting turn of events a solely Nigerian situation is to ignore the pain that many media institutions in Africa have felt. In all four corners of the continent—but particularly in sub-Saharan Africa—journalists are experiencing growing anxiety about the future of their profession. These anxieties are all the more pronounced in the COVID era, when the need for accurate, up-to-the-minute information has become most necessary. When sources of fact-based information in the public interest struggle, more space is available for self-interested and malign actors to influence and manipulate civic discourse for their own ends—not only for the pursuit of commercial profit, but also for political power and escape from democratic accountability.

The imperative of the moment is how to produce media that is independent and professional in the face of dim economic realities, constraining political realities, and the worst public health crisis of our time.

The imperative of the moment, therefore, is how to produce media that is independent and professional in the face of dim economic realities, constraining political realities, and the worst public health crisis of our time. It calls for radical insights and fresh innovation that can build on some promising foundations already manifest in many markets across the continent.

Central to this conversation is how to build an enduring, financially sustainable media system for the region. Of note is the urgent need to identify which of the broad array of content producers qualify as serving the public good: not all media define their core mission as holding accountable a country's institutions of power or acting as auditors to promote democratic ideas. Therefore, it is important to focus on the narrow but prized segment of the media that refers to itself as journalism, which Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write is "defined by primary loyalty to citizens," holds as "its essence a discipline in verification," whose "practitioners maintain an independence from those they cover," and the "first principle" of which is "truth and accuracy."[1]

To be sure, this is not the type of journalism which, if it discharges its mission faithfully, will have its promoters smiling all the way to the bank, even during the best of times. This is especially true on a continent where the political culture is still largely illiberal, intolerant, and famously autocratic. The implicit question has always been how to transform these constraints into advantages and build a pathway to financial sustainability.

Sustainability is the foundation for independence. If the African media is to contribute to democratic development, market growth, and a tradition of liberty and human rights, it must solve this important question of financial independence.

Sustainability is the foundation for independence. If the African media is to contribute to democratic development, market growth, and a tradition of liberty and human rights, it must solve this important question of financial independence. Audience growth and monetization, as well as innovation around multiple digital platforms, will play a big role in this vision.

In response to this challenge, *Premium Times* (a Nigerian newspaper of which this author is publisher and editor-in-chief) is broadly diversifying its sustainability efforts to accommodate donations, a membership model, book publishing, a data project, philanthropic support, ambitious partnerships, due diligence operations, commercial advertising, events convening, and training. This mixed model rests on the principle that news consumers and a loyal audience will gravitate only to platforms that reflect their basic aspirations; offer depth, context, and interpretative layers; and serve as courageous watchdogs of a social and political system.

In September 2020, *Premium Times* signed a major partnership deal with a Silicon Valley digital media company, Voices of the African Continent (VOTAC).[2] VOTAC's content includes popular news and entertainment programs, films, and documentaries. It is delivered through mobile apps and U.S. cable television networks and is available in over 33 million television households. As part of their agreement, *Premium Times* and VOTAC will produce a financial news program called "ACM Today" out of studios in San Francisco and Abuja, focusing on the African capital market.

Another regional trailblazer is the *Daily Maverick* in Cape Town, South Africa. *Daily Maverick* is using readership growth and engagement as key drivers of revenue and investment growth. By far, the *Daily Maverick* is the gold standard in generating reader revenue through a membership model centered on engaging content driven by impactful investigative reporting. The paper employs myriad models: for example, a nonprofit vehicle funds its investigative unit and social endeavors like climate change journalism through grants, while partnerships and impact investment funds provide resources for other content. Its approach to converting readers into revenue includes subscriptions, paywalls, and membership models which, as the *Maverick*'s chief executive officer, Styli Charalambous, puts it, helps the paper maintain its "duty to public service by keeping all content accessible even to those who cannot afford to pay."[3]

The South African market provides other models that might be adaptable beyond South Africa, from donations from supporters (as used by the investigative journalism newsroom *amaBhungane*) to a range of audience growth and distribution methods pursuing advertising revenue via messaging platforms like WhatsApp. Although the innovative Zimbabwean platform 263chat pioneered this model, it blossomed in South Africa with notable experiments like *The Continent*—a pan-African weekly newspaper founded by Simon Allison and Sipho Kings, produced in partnership with the *Mail & Guardian*. The most successful variant of this approach is HealthAlert, the COVID-19 helpline created by Gustav Praekelt, which now has more than twenty million users and is used by the World Health Organization and many national governments. It publishes on the premium WhatsApp Business API—setting it apart from the poor-quality content featured on What's Crap on WhatsApp, a five-minute voice fact-checking note developed by AfricaCheck.[4]

The Mauritius academic Roukaya Kasenally makes the case for a public media fund, a proposal similar to the state grant in Francophone African countries.[5] A version of this model can be found in Cote d'Ivoire, where media are supported by a 4 percent low interest loan guaranteed by the government. Similarly, the Nigerian government and the Nigerian Press Organization are collaborating on an effort to introduce an 8 percent interest loan to be managed by the central bank. Unfortunately, initiatives like these can become surreptitious mechanisms for censorship; but two years ago, the South African *Mail & Guardian* followed the innovative efforts of *The Namibian* to wean itself off of donor funding and achieve self-sufficiency by investing in a trust designed to receive philanthropic funding, an international trend which shows that dependency can be avoided.

Content paywalls have not been a loud success for media in many African countries, but *Business Day* in Nigeria has implemented one with some modest success after other papers failed. This apparent contradiction suggests that the Nigerian market may not necessarily be rejecting paywalls entirely, but rather refuses to work with those that are not well administered. Today, *Business Day* complements its subscription paywall with philanthropic funding, along with other products like advertising, events, specialized publications, and investment in migrating its "commercially viable" content into new value propositions. These new initiatives include "a full research and data analytics company" which publishes as many as 20 annual reports on banking, technology, finance, trade, and other economic sectors.[6] *Business Day*'s complete range of offerings includes publishing commentary from two expert economists, a paid subscription that includes content from the *Financial Times* and *The Economist*, as well as access to its metered paywall where readers are able to view five articles each month at no charge, with monthly rates from N835 to N1,500 (US$2 to US$4).

The debate around paywalls is embedded in a broader conversation about reader revenue. The relatively new Nigerian online platform *Stears* provides an interesting model, offering a cocktail of data, membership, philanthropy, and subscription plans to grow audience digital engagement and market edge. Its profitability is still unclear, but with the interest of savvy philanthropists coupled with investments from local tech companies, *Stears* has managed to carve out an interesting niche that promises to grow. These new investments have already enabled its data and membership projects to build a significant and loyal audience of nearly ten thousand readers who provide it with what an insider recently described as a handsome income.

The Swiss online platform, *Pulse*, also deserves attention for its growth strategy. Present in three African markets (Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya), *Pulse* is built on strong investments in digital media and technology. With this foundation, *Pulse* built an early engagement strategy around entertainment and sports culture which locked in a significant youth audience. Most recently, Google has supported *Pulse*'s efforts to expand to other areas, including political and business news. These strides help differentiate *Pulse* from other foreign digital publishers which rely solely on kitsch, entertainment, and sports to attract African audiences.

This handful of relatively successful African news platforms is clarifying the status of media platforms in the digital era. Are they media organizations using technology to enable their operations, or are they technology platforms in the business of news? The truth is that the overlap between the two is in perfect alignment for digital-era news platforms, and that this is an area African media must explore if it is to escape its current predicament.

It is time for African media to face the challenge of innovation—in its storytelling, distribution, organization, the security of its staff, and above all how it finances its journalism.

In Kenya and South Africa, for instance, the rising popularity of streaming media has badly dented the revenue of digital satellite television companies. Multichoice, an erstwhile leader in that market, has lost an alarming one-hundred thousand subscribers to streaming companies such as Netflix and Hulu.[7] Multichoice is asking for regulation of these streaming competitors despite the fact that it is itself among the most transnational companies in Africa. Rather than take this route, it is time for African media to face the challenge of innovation—in its storytelling, distribution, organization, the security of its staff, and above all how it finances its journalism.

The Standard of Kenya, following the path of its rival *The Nation*, is seeking paths to sustainability through investment in data, philanthropy, and partnerships. *The Standard* in particular has ventured into collaborations with agricultural institutions and small and medium-sized enterprises to recruit them into multimedia advertising. Both the Kenyan media giants pivoted to innovation for sustainability a little late, coming from a once comfortable but now unsteady tradition of reliance on advertising and sales. As Joseph Odindo told a conference on entrepreneurial journalism organized by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in 2018 in Accra, Ghana, "We must be ready to abandon the traditional and venture into the unknown. Doing business as usual cannot save news publishing from the twin pressures of hostile governments and the digital revolution."[8]

The recent flourishing of data journalism on the African continent, both as complement to existing news operations and as standalone enterprises, is one of the pleasant developments in the region today. Institutions like Budgit and Dataphyte in Nigeria remind us that however dim the sustainability landscape may be, these innovations demonstrate that there are paths forward for media outlets willing to embrace change. New services like bespoke reports drawing on journalistic expertise, nonprofit vehicles to collect funds for public interest journalism, and experimentation with new distribution channels are all examples of an African media space that is striving for long-term sustainability. Adaptations like these show a way for media outlets to grow beyond reliance on advertising for survival. These opportunities are waiting to be seized.

Endnotes

1 “The Elements of Journalism,” American Press Institute, n.d., *www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/elements-journalism*.

2 “Premium Times, VOTAC Agree Strategic Alliance to Aid Innovation, FDI, Economic Mobility in Africa,” Premium Times, 23 September 2020, *www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/416464-premium-times-votac-agree-strategic-alliance-to-aid-innovation-fdi-economic-mobility-in-africa.html*.

3 Francis Mdlongwa, ed., *Entrepreneurial Journalism in Africa: Opportunities, Challenges and Risks for Media in the Digital Age* (Johannesburg: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2019), *www.kas.de/documents/285576/285628/Entrepreneurial+Journalism+in+Africa.pdf/1a371c3e-38c9-afd1-239c-3b1c9db35c3e?version=1.0&t=1553523656523*.

4 Cristina Tardáguila, “‘What’s Crap on WhatsApp?’ Has Debunked 25 Hoaxes in 6 Episodes. What Is the Challenge Now?,” Poynter, 14 January 2020, *www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2020/whats-crap-on-whatsapp-has-debunked-25-hoaxes-in-6-episodes-what-is-the-challenge*.

5 Roukaya Kasenally, “The Dilemma of Africa’s Media,” in *Entrepreneurial Journalism in Africa: Opportunities, Challenges and Risks for Media in the Digital Age*.

6 “Letter From the Publisher,” *BusinessDay*, 8 May 2018, *https://businessday.ng/life-arts/article/letter-from-the-publisher*.

7 Carolyne Tanui, “Rising Popularity of Streaming Services Led to A Decline In Digital TV Subscriptions – CAK,” *WeeTracker.com*, 30 September 2019, *https://weetracker.com/2019/09/30/decline-in-digital-tv-subscriptions*.

8 Mdlongwa, *Entrepreneurial Journalism in Africa: Opportunities, Challenges and Risks for Media in the Digital Age*.