



World Press Freedom Day May 3, 2016 And 25th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration

May 03, 2016

Helsinki, Finland

Keynote address by Gwen Lister

Executive Chairperson of the Namibia Media Trust

<http://wpfd2016.com/2016/05/04/windhoek-declaration-25-years-ago-group-journalists-drafted-statement-press-freedom/>

25 years after the Windhoek Declaration – Press Freedom, Right to Information and Transparency

*Mr Juha Sipilä, Prime Minister of Finland,
Ms Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General,
Mr Jussi Pajunen, Mayor of the City of Helsinki,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Guests*

25 years ago today the Windhoek Declaration affirmed the need for journalistic freedom and independence. Since then reversals in the overall media environment have brought much of the continent to the brink of the abyss in terms of a prevalence of repression and oppression. Now new and extremely daunting challenges face the media in Africa.

The Declaration was adopted in 1991 in a climate of optimism. It was due, in most part, to Namibia's newfound freedom, the slow unraveling of apartheid in South Africa as well as growing resistance to African dictatorships and development-type autocratic regimes. This context resulted in an impetus for democratic reforms within a rapidly changing media environment across the continent.

But these have been all too short-lived, and are now overshadowed by what Reporters Sans Frontiers calls in its 2016 press freedom report a "deep and disturbing decline", not only in Africa but in many other parts of the world as well.

While almost unthinkable in this digital age, there has been a rise in authoritarianism on the continent. The results: increased jailing of journalists, restricted access, censorship, surveillance, threats and killings, undermining of press councils, co-option of private media by political overlords, continued government throttling of state-owned media, including broadcasters that should be public voices, as well as suspension of the internet.

Included in the negatives, are, among others:

- The huge inequalities in terms of access to the media, especially the internet. High penetration rates in countries like Nigeria and South Africa are in stark contrast to dismal scenarios like Eritrea or Burundi where access to digital media is minimal and state-controlled radio remains the public's primary source of information. The digital divide in Africa continues to separate not only countries, but also communities, exacerbating the widening gulf between urban and rural, rich and poor.
- There have been dramatic reversals for press freedom in Egypt and South Sudan; and in Burundi, where independent media has been gagged, scores of journalists persecuted and forced into exile. 'Secretive' countries such as under-reported Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea and the Gambia are some of the worst culprits for silencing free expression with impunity. Many others - including Somalia - are dangerous for the practice of journalism, either due to draconian governments or extremist movements.
- One of the biggest threats to free speech and the media, both in a number of African countries and further afield, is the critical issue of journalist safety. It is chilling to think that the endless litany of attacks, jailing and killing of journalists is becoming the 'new normal' and that the practice of reporting and speaking truth to power requires more courage than ever before.
- While there are positives in the fact that 19 countries in Africa have adopted Freedom of Information laws, some of these are far from ideal and laws alone do not necessarily guarantee access. A country like Ethiopia has FOI and yet journalists there are jailed and charged under anti terrorism laws simply for doing their job. Independent media are not only essential for the right to impart information, but also for the right of the public to seek and receive it.
- And in some states clinging to the definition of democracy by the skin of their teeth, and only by virtue of regular elections, comes a new form of abuse where governments don't hesitate to 'switch off' the internet and shut down access to telecommunications even at such critical times. Burundi, Uganda and Ethiopia are cases in point where 'security' concerns were exploited as the reason for stifling access. Several governments are preparing to 'police' the internet, more particularly social media, and this includes Zimbabwe, whose President promises to implement harsh measures similar to those of China.
- Even in my home country, Namibia, birthplace of the Windhoek Declaration, and regarded as the freest in Africa in terms of press freedom, the messages are mixed. The promise of an access to information regime on the one hand, is marred by government warnings to regulate media as well as cyberspace on the other.

The bleak scenario that faces media in many parts of Africa today, has nevertheless been offset by some positives in the past quarter of a century.

These include:

- The concept of independent media, once a taboo, has become more widely accepted. A new consensus on the principles of freedom of the press and information came about largely as a result of the momentum of change given impetus by the Windhoek Declaration. Committed journalists in Africa and

beyond continue to work and fight for the professional principles that are vital to give their craft its role and its respect.

- Ten years after the Windhoek Declaration, the adoption of the African Charter on Broadcasting brought about a liberalization of the airwaves, traditionally an area tightly controlled by governments. This allowed for private and community radio. It was an encouraging sign, given the popularity and accessibility of the medium to a majority of people on the continent. In some countries today, this access remains all they have for independent voices.
- Another decade later came a new movement which recognised that rights to free speech and information were not just about media. They were also key to unlocking the potential of vibrant and informed civil society able to hold governments to account. The multi-stakeholder African Platform on Access to Information (APAI) convened by the Media Institute for Southern Africa, gained ground in affirming information as a fundamental human right, and encouraging the formulation of continent-wide laws to this effect. And, just as the Windhoek Declaration led to the adoption of May 3 as World Press Freedom Day, it has been followed by another important milestone of UNESCO now recognising September 28 each year as the International Day for Universal Access to Information. Hopefully the APAI can do for access, what the Windhoek Declaration did to boost recognition of the importance of independent media on the continent.
- Still in its infancy in 1991, the digital revolution and mobile telecommunications in particular have gained momentum in the years since the Windhoek Declaration. This in turn has facilitated more widespread acceptance of the exercise of free speech and opinion, with more and more Africans finding voice online. Polls show a positive trend in fora such as Twitter, in raising political awareness, and hashtag “activism” is on the rise and increasingly driving African conversations.
- There have been shifts in media’s role on the continent, from a dominance of purely traditional media in 1991, to a more converged and online world which includes blogging and the rising popularity of social media. This has enriched journalism, but has also at times dented the viability of legacy media represented at the Windhoek seminar. Yet, although print has suffered in some countries with higher internet penetration, it is still growing in others and remains a vital component of Africa’s media landscape, also in keeping literacy on the agenda.
- A new and exciting development demonstrating the power of good investigative journalism, comes in the form of global cross-border collaborations, most notably the Panama Papers expose led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). Regarded as something of a journalistic feat, the project involved millions of documents, and was executed over a protracted period and in concert with scores of different global media including the African Network of Centres for Investigative Journalism (ANCIR). The Panama Papers exposed on multiple media platforms the hidden offshore wealth of the rich and powerful of the world. The still-unfolding revelations, holding power to account all over the globe, have taken the world by storm, even inspiring a T-shirt with the words: ‘Mossack Fonseca: Because Taxes are for Poor People’. The significance of good investigative and ethical journalism, a key enabler in affirming the right to information, also facilitates sharing of resources and

skills and casts the spotlight anew on its importance in good governance and democracy. And for those who feel the state of global journalism is in the doldrums, the Panama Papers offer hope of a revival of trust – and African journalism is part of this.

Despite all these gains, the state of free speech and access to information on the continent is still plagued by heartrendingly sad and bad scenarios in some places.

The challenge now is how to strengthen civil society voices and deepen democracy through entrenchment of freedoms. The answer may lie in initiatives like collaborative and cross-border investigative journalism. Organisations, individuals and activists must harness digital convergence and join forces in a global fight for freedoms increasingly under threat everywhere, whether in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Libya, Syria or Iran.

The African proverb “if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together” could be the rallying cry for a united global voice for free and unfettered speech and access in an atmosphere of safety.

With undeniable setbacks in free expression globally, at times in the most unexpected places, our collective efforts as defenders of this fundamental right become increasingly important. For this reason, the Namibian Media Trust, which I Chair, today recommits itself to this critical task by initiating The Free Speech for Africa Award to inspire voices on the continent to speak up against social, economic, and political injustice.

A key goal must be to get African and other governments to make it a rule rather than an exception to implement an open and transparent regime in which free speech and access to information are not only guaranteed, but protected from erosion.

In tandem, we need to compel governments to take heed of the Midrand Declaration on Press Freedom in Africa, adopted by the Pan African Parliament in 2013, which recognizes the inexorable link between a free press, poverty reduction and good governance.

For all who believe in journalism, we need to hold governments accountable to their commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular on “public access to information and fundamental freedoms”. This is our right and, more importantly, our responsibility.

Gwen Lister, who was founding editor of The Namibian in 1985, also chaired the UNESCO Seminar which adopted the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Media in 1991, and is currently Executive Chair of the Namibia Media Trust which publishes The Namibian.