



The Guerrilla Typewriters - Liberation Through Information

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I recently polled a group of Namibian youth as to where they primarily accessed their news and information. The answer was that social media topped the list. Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter, in that order, followed by newspapers and then radio and TV.

But on my question as to which they trusted most, print came up trumps.

My discussion with the young people also told me that, despite their scepticism about much of the often questionable content which pervades these networks, they would continue to mainly access these sources. Primarily because buying and reading newspapers seemed like hard work in comparison.

I was immediately transported back to the 80s, the heyday of what became known as the 'guerilla typewriters'. They were called such not because they took up arms against apartheid South Africa or draconian regimes further afield, but because they spurned government controls and propaganda and strove for independent media.

It seemed appropriate to take the youth back to when it had all started – to a time when independent newspapers especially, meant a great deal in the daily lives of people who had little or no access to information; when entire editions sold out, and when being a journalist was revered as a sacred trust.

Back then Namibia was still at war for its freedom and independence. Mobile phones and the internet weren't yet in existence and legacy media was predominantly under the control of the colonisers.

Our struggle was not unique. It was, and is still today, mirrored in other parts of the continent and the world, in places where authoritarian governments control what people read, watch, listen to and even say.

The guerilla typewriters of the 80s and 90s were voices of independent African journalism who were brave and ethical and served the public interest. Many of them were brought together – thanks to UNESCO - in the Namibian capital of Windhoek in 1991 to formulate a declaration which would go on to inspire the UN to declare May 3 World Press Freedom Day.

As I spoke I looked at the young people who sat in front of me, mobiles in hand, ready to tweet or post either what I was talking about, or something completely different. The digital era had dawned along with the promise of an infinite supply of information, with depth and diversity of

content, greater interactivity and empowerment for vast masses of people.

But it was clear they were both caught up in and often confused in the tsunami that is social media. Many were unwilling, some unable, to distinguish fact from fiction, and information from the disinformation, which they access, share and also produce on a daily basis, mostly via social media. Propaganda, lies, even ‘fake news’ – although I dislike the term – isn’t anything new. It’s simply more prolific in the era of the internet.

I was encouraged by the fact that print still seems to have the highest level of trust, although it doesn’t have the reach of the online world.

I had been one of those guerrilla typewriters, I told the group, as I held my omnipresent notebook aloft to prove my point. The best tool for documentation and verification to those of us for whom journalism is both a passion and a calling.

Many of those listening probably believed that the digital age has sounded a death knell for the role of traditional media and those they may see as dinosaurs of journalism like myself.

I tried to convince them otherwise. Instead it was of absolute critical importance that journalists today must neither give up nor give in. They should withstand the temptation to become demoralized on the one hand, or feed the frenzy for mindless infotainment and disinformation on the other.

They should strive ever harder to be the sources of credible news and information – offline and online. It is they who should help ensure that the internet is not primarily used to stifle the very democracy it promises. High standards of professionalism, self-regulation and adherence to journalistic standards are vital to win public trust and provide credible news as well as informed comment.

I reminded the youth that many committed journalists the world over were making immense sacrifices - some paying the ultimate price - for simply doing their job. It is important they have our support, and we should not therefore lose faith in the service professional journalism can provide, even in the face of terrible oppression.

The new role for audiences like the youth was to rise to the challenge of promoting digital literacy, to minimize ‘bullshit receptivity’ and in the process help increase public trust in legitimate sources of information.

I impressed upon them the importance of governments too having a key role in refraining from contributing to a toxic information environment. This includes a commitment to a free and open online community. And it also means those culprit regimes should refrain from the escalating attacks on internet freedom and free expression by restricting or switching off the internet, thereby denying access

I told my young audience they should be proud that Namibia had led the way in Africa in acknowledging the importance of a free, independent and pluralistic media.

But they should also be concerned that our country, so progressive in other respects, now lagged behind others on what is called the Right to Information, and the law to provide such access.

I talked to them about the campaign for ATI legislation in Namibia headed by the ACTION coalition of media, developmental and research organisations. It has worked closely with the Ministry of ICT to help formulate a progressive bill. But disappointingly, our government – like

others in the SADC region, the continent and the globe - is now dragging its feet. ATI laws, and there are several in Africa, must have substance and not simply be meaningless pieces of paper to satisfy political ends.

Why should all of this matter to them, I asked the group, and then answered my own question. Because rights-based campaigns, whether for freedom of speech and expression or the right to know, aren't just about the media. They are for everyone. Citizens need to and must take ownership of them before it is too late. Democracy shouldn't be taken for granted wherever it exists. It is such a fragile thing.

The group were all familiar with the Sustainable Development Goals and I tried to impress upon them how important it was for governments which wanted to achieve any or all of these goals, to create an enabling environment for media – all media – combined with an OPEN and transparent regime on access to information.

SDG 16, which promotes inclusivity and accountability, could be called the 'transformational' SDG, because none of the other noble goals can happen without it. Among its targets, there is a call for all countries to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms". To advance this, states should respect and promote press freedom and be champions of ATI laws and ensure their rigorous implementation.

If we can conquer the forces that stifle free expression and access, and empower people to want to seek out verifiable information and knowledge, then it is half the battle won in the quest for sustainable development.

The struggle is still upon all of us, youth most importantly, to free our minds through knowledge, and journalists must get back to the forefront and in their numbers, reviving the spirit of those guerrilla typewriters.

There never has been a more important time for incisive and committed, and yes, also advocacy media, to use professional journalism to verify facts, facilitate informed opinion, and dig deeper to stimulate and feed the public appetite for quality news and information that can be used to make a better life for all. And to have, and use, right to information laws to do the best job they can.

The guerrilla typewriters put press freedom on the African agenda when they gathered together to adopt the Windhoek Declaration. That call on governments to put in place a conducive environment for media to be able to freely inform, and therefore empower citizenry remains of paramount importance today.

Good journalism speaking truth to power is indispensable in the global campaign for access to information.

We must, I concluded when speaking to the youth, bring back the spirit that embodied the guerrilla typewriters. This time not just among journalists themselves, but among all producers and consumers of information across the board – in other words, everyone.

Then, and only then, will the world be able to rise to the challenge to build knowledge and rights-based societies. I think – I hope – that I got some of those young people on board. The future depends on them.

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