



## **One Economy Foundation Media Summit and Awards, 2024**

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### **Thoughts About the State of the Media** ***Freest Press, Best Journalism?***

Thank you to #BreakFree and One Economy for spotlighting scourge of violence, especially Gender Based Violence, femicide and reproductive health and for organising the workshop and media summit on these burning topics

Also for recognising the importance of journalism's contribution to awareness-raising and helping rid our country of these evils and recognising media's role in driving societal change. Journalists, and good journalism, is seldom recognised by those other than their peers. So, it is always heart-warming and reward in itself when those not in media celebrate journalism's essential role.

Congratulations in advance to winners and runners up in all categories. May the recognition of your work incentivize you all to greater heights.

Since Namibia tops the Reporters Without Borders Africa press freedom rankings why is its journalism not the best on the continent? This index takes stock of the extent to which an enabling environment exists for journalism in any given country to thrive without the host of constraints that face journalists under fire in other, more oppressive countries in Africa and further afield. And although Namibia is not problem-free in this regard, we certainly have it a lot better than many of our peers in other countries. These rankings do not, however, take into account the state of journalism itself, and this brings me to the pertinent question asked of me that if we're the freest, why aren't we the best. And I've spent a lot of time since thinking about this comment which I do believe has some merit. And, so my intention tonight is just to share some thoughts with you to hopefully ignite debate.

I speak as one of journalism's biggest defenders. Always. *"If journalism serves a core democratic function, without which democracy itself is all but inconceivable, then*

*journalistic excellence must also factor into the quality of democracy*". If we believe this – which I certainly do - then it's important that while we recognize that there are bright spots in our investigative journalism, in particular, we need to introspect deeply about the current state of our craft. We need to interrogate what Afrobarometer have identified across the continent as a loss of public trust in journalists and journalism and the potential negative impact on our democracy as a result of dwindling public interest and deteriorating standards. And then again, to see this in context – Africans have lost faith in just about everything, from parliamentarians to police and the courts. And where about decade ago they were polled differently and believed in rights and democracy, they're now ambivalent at best. So, we have a deeper problem here.

## **THE STATE OF JOURNALISM WORLDWIDE, POST TRUTH ERA**

The future of good journalism - worldwide - is at risk. As people flocked online, to social media in particular, advertisers followed suit. The result has been devastating for most traditional media, especially newspapers, as advertising has always been their mainstay. Social media has gobbled up both advertisers as well as our audience. And good, fact-based journalism has been the biggest loser with an audience whose attention span is increasingly limited to clickbait and sensationalism. As a result, there's been a tendency for media to adopt a 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em' approach' which further exacerbates the problem.

## **COMING BACK HOME**

If social media is the mirror of our society, then it doesn't paint a pretty picture as far as the state of our nation is concerned. These online spaces that many of us once believed would lead to greater democratization and freedom of expression, have arguably instead helped fuel disinformation, hate speech, misogyny, homophobia, intolerance .. you name it. And it's a place where uninformed opinions have become facts in the minds of many. Amid journalism's many daunting challenges, it is media's crisis of credibility and loss of public trust that is perhaps THE biggest threat of all. So our goal should be to win back an audience that is in itself in a moral crisis, and in the process raise up our people rather than try to appeal to their most base instincts.

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE**

Good journalism is also about what the public needs, not only what they want, and it may take a while for this to find traction. Let's try and fix the cracks in that mirror and persist in raising standards of professionalism and excellence in the media. Constant innovation, and adapting our journalism to this challenging era is also important. I've become a great believer in solutions-based and explanatory journalism and I would urge that we do more of this. I often wonder what sense the ordinary man or woman makes of complex stories about money-laundering for instance, which although important, are often difficult for some of us ordinary mortals to understand.

And whereas journalism must speak truth to power and reveal the deep-seated problems in our society, we need to do more to offer solutions as we go.

## **IDEAS**

- A. Build back trust by going back to basics with quality journalism
- B. Promote media literacy and encourage everyone to be their own fact-checker especially when consuming information online.
- C. The public **MUST** back the media. Democracy needs it. People need it to become informed citizens and active participants in our democracy. We must ensure this message hits home, because if it doesn't, the future of democracy itself is in peril.
- D. Encourage engagement and participation with communities to bring them closer to media and help explain to them what journalism is all about.
- E. Partnerships for expertise. For eg, BreakFree provide experts to speak to journalists to better understand what they're writing about especially when it comes to specialized fields.
- F. Can't have good journalism without good journalists and for them not to become demoralised, they need decent remuneration and working conditions and their safety guaranteed. It's not only situations of war like the current carnage in Gaza, for example, that takes its toll on journalists. Comparatively it can be said that while we live in relative peace, we are not peaceful, and our high rates of GBV speaks for itself. And the negative effect on the mental health of journalists covering GBV on a daily basis cannot be underestimated either.
- G. We must all help to raise public awareness about the fact that journalism – unlike social media where there is no such obligation - involves processes and adherence to an ethical code and there's a self-regulatory mechanism with an Ombudsman to keep us accountable.
- H. It goes without saying, training and mentoring must continue on a sustained basis. And a personal appeal from one who does mentoring, especially of young women journalists. Please, please read. Journalism is about good writing skills and often you're writing in a language that is not your own, and reading is the best way to make your writing more accessible and understandable.
- I. In my opinion, there's a big difference between reporting and journalism, so we have to dig deeper and improve our content to re-engage with communities, and this has special import in this election year. Let's not just report on what the politicians say. Let's properly interrogate their policies – if at all - on issues such as GBV, homophobia, LGBTQI issues, abortion, environmental priorities, among others, so Namibians can exercise their right to vote thoughtfully at the polling booth.
- J. And finally, although this list is by no means exhaustive, let's stop this tendency of shooting the messenger. Whether people like to hear it or not, we live in a still democratic country which is nevertheless steeped in prejudice. We talk about the need for journalistic ethics, but it sometimes seems these are not required of anyone but them. There's a pervasive culture of entitlement and greed among the

haves. There are scary levels of violence against women and rape and abuse of children on a daily basis. Not all, but many, are intolerant of LGBTQI rights. We turn criminals into heroes and we often reward incompetence even in the face of the squandering of financial resources that could and should be put to better use. Public officials often block the media from doing their work, withholding information that would facilitate better journalism. And our civil society is weak and underfunded. I could go on and on. These are not the fault of journalism but nevertheless some of the many things they must cover and/or deal with on a daily basis.

I do not want to end this evening on a negative note because that is not my intent. So while journalists have to up the ante and do more to be of service to our communities, we should not be allowed to forget those with a great work ethic and journalistic skills, people with the passion to – despite the adverse circumstances – make good journalism count in helping to sustain our democracy, elevate the standards of public debate and although this may sound overly dramatic, it will take combined effort on the part of progressive-minded Namibians, in whichever fields of endeavour we find ourselves, to help ward off societal collapse and make our country a better place for all to be.