A giant step forward for media professionals in Benin

Union des Professionnels des Medias du Benin (UPMB)

It suddenly got a whole lot easier to be a professional journalist in Benin. After a national press code was passed by parliament on January 23, 2015, media workers across the country are now able to carry out their work without fear of imprisonment.

This includes reporting on the President, which has historically been a subject privy to immunity through its “offense au president” (presidential offense) clause that safeguards how the head of state is presented in the press. This landmark event took place after three days of deliberation by parliament and over two years of lobbying by Benin’s Media Union (UPMB) and other media associations such as Conseil National de Patronat (CNPA) who worked with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Article 19, a human rights organization, to develop an advocacy strategy for the adoption of a code.

“What made this initiative successful is that the media proved their willingness to professionalize, to improve their capacities and to be more responsible in the treatment of information. And parliamentarians listened. They responded to these efforts,” explained Nadia Nata, OSIWA’s Political Governance Program Officer who oversaw the Foundation’s UPMB grant. “Their willingness to review the Collective Convention of Journalists and their continual engagement with the State media’s regulatory body and other key stakeholders, including members of parliament, government and the judiciary, helped ensure this process was as professional as it was inclusive.”

Benin has traditionally ranked as one of the top countries in Africa for press freedom and freedom of speech, which are both constitutionally protected. But in practice, and since President Boni Yayi took power in 2006, there have been numerous legal and regulatory restrictions imposed on media freedom.

In the reformed press code, the Media Associations led by UPMB made a list of suggestions that would professionalize and protect Benin’s media. These include a specific section on freedom of information, which should pave the way for a comprehensive freedom of information law in the country. The general provision to continue to imprison journalists for what they publish, which was in the original draft sent by the government to parliament, was removed. There is now only one circumstance under the law for which journalists may be imprisoned: if their work leads to damage of public property. For any other offences, journalists will only face financial penalties if found guilty.

“At least now Benin can be proud to say that, in terms of information and communication, we have a code,” said Koffi Benoit, a Beninese photojournalist. “And this is a code that calls for more accountability and that encourages responsibility... Every person who now wants to do this type of work has to do so with a good conscience.”

The passage of Benin’s press code is a great victory for press freedom in the country, but is also one that can be shared by all journalists across West Africa. It sets a new precedent which is hoped to be emulated by other countries in the region and beyond.
African Network of Centers for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR)

What lies beneath: journalists delve for the truth

The peace, stability and well-being of citizens are partly dependent on an effective management of natural resource and public resources in West Africa. A major impediment to this development is the thick veil of secrecy that shrouds much of the management of natural and public resources. The entire contracting process is foreign to most people in the region. The clauses, conditions and prerogatives in these contracts are also often unknown or misunderstood by the public. That is a fertile environment for corrupt practices to flourish. Egregious cases of abuses or mismanagement, as well as strife on and around mining sites, are also not widely understood. Government’s spending and corruption, especially in public procurement through which most states spend their budgets, is often under-reported.

Herein lies the invaluable role of the media. Often referred to as the ‘Fourth Estate’, the press in West Africa, as in any other part of the world is a key accountability tool. A free, independent, plural and vibrant media ecosystem is one that informs, educates and empowers. It is indispensable ‘checking function’ on government to improve the reach and impact of investigative reporting and investigative newsrooms modeled and adapted from the American Investigative News Network (INN) has been steadily staking its ground as a fertile environment for corrupt practices to flourish.

Innoculated and transparent, investigative newsrooms are built on the foundations of ethical reporting, investigative tools and investigative content - led by way of encrypted emails and phone numbers – to data, technology, cross-examination, editorial and other small grant investigations. They worked with a dozen investigative journalists (including freelance journalists) over the course of a year to pursue in-depth reports, including on the Ponzi Schemes in Sierra Leone, tax evasion in the oil and gas sectors in West Africa, and corruption in the public procurement of medicines. They also helped launch the Afrileaks portal that enables whistleblowers to safely leak information through an encrypted platform. Additionally, they launched a comprehensive mapping of fiscal jurisdiction of oil companies in Nigeria.

The production of informative and qualitative research is at the core of ANCIR’s work. But the organization further recognizes that in order to sustainably support the media ecosystem in the region, they must also address structural issues of investment, training and mentoring of new journalists, providing technical support (such as cybersecurity in Ghana and Nigeria, ethics, forensic investigations, cross-examination) and the legal protection of journalists. Ensuring the security of journalists and their work were overriding factors the organization to pursue a joint project on investigative support via an investigative dashboard, to data, technology, cross-examination, editorial and other experts.

At a regional story camp in Dakar, in partnership with UNODC, ANCIR provided training to more than 40 Sahelian and West African journalists from over 16 countries. ANCIR’s newsrooms members such as Anas Anas (Ghana, Tiger Eye) and Dapo Olayeurunyomi (Nigeria, Premium Times) led to ANCIR spearheading a new regional hub with $100,000 pegged investment from the UNODC, tentatively placed in Burkina Faso. Tech security - by way of encrypted emails and phone numbers – and stringent recruitment, legal and fact-checking processes were also implemented. Finally, given the growing population of West Africa and the tremendous youth bulge, news consumption patterns are changing radically. iLabs has been supporting disruptive technology in newsrooms by embedding developers, journalists and communications personnel to drastically rethink how news and information can be packaged to reach a critical mass of people – notably the youth – but also people outside urban centers or with limited reading capacity.

While it is growing more robust, the West African media ecosystem is still fragmented and relatively ill-equipped to investigate and follow-up on opaque financial and economic issues. This may be due to lack of capacity, technological know-how or sheer difficulty in accessing critical information or data, and in some cases, only a recent focus on journalistic investigations. But the result is often the same. Although a great deal of progress has been made, media coverage of critical issues relating to mining contracts, tracking of state expenditures is not yet robust enough. This leaves citizens less equipped to be agents of political and social pressure, because they simply lack access to the information.

Investigating natural resources in West Africa can be a dangerous business. Safeguarding the risks to the lives of media workers must be paramount. The African Network of Centers for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR), a voluntary association of investigative newsrooms modeled and adapted from the American Investigative News Network (INN) has been steadily staking its ground as a media force to reckon with, and one which builds technology platforms and security systems to improve the reach and impact of investigative content. In 2014, ANCIR was incubated by the African Media Initiative (AMI) and moved to the credibility of their work were overriding factors the organization to pursue a joint project on investigative support via an investigative dashboard, to data, technology, cross-examination, editorial and other experts.

The peace, stability and well-being of citizens are partly dependent on an effective management of natural resource and public resources in West Africa. A major impediment to this development is the thick veil of secrecy that shrouds much of the management of natural and public resources. The entire contracting process is foreign to most people in the region. The clauses, conditions and prerogatives in these contracts are also often unknown or misunderstood by the public. That is a fertile environment for corrupt practices to flourish. Egregious cases of abuses or mismanagement, as well as strife on and around mining sites, are also not widely understood. Government’s spending and corruption, especially in public procurement through which most states spend their budgets, is often under-reported.

Herein lies the invaluable role of the media. Often referred to as the ‘Fourth Estate’, the press in West Africa, as in any other part of the world is a key accountability tool. A free, independent, plural and vibrant media ecosystem is one that informs, educates and empowers. It is indispensable ‘checking function’ on government to improve the reach and impact of investigative reporting and investigative newsrooms modeled and adapted from the American Investigative News Network (INN) has been steadily staking its ground as a fertile environment for corrupt practices to flourish.

Innoculated and transparent, investigative newsrooms are built on the foundations of ethical reporting, investigative tools and investigative content - led by way of encrypted emails and phone numbers – to data, technology, cross-examination, editorial and other small grant investigations. They worked with a dozen investigative journalists (including freelance journalists) over the course of a year to pursue in-depth reports, including on the Ponzi Schemes in Sierra Leone, tax evasion in the oil and gas sectors in West Africa, and corruption in the public procurement of medicines. They also helped launch the Afrileaks portal that enables whistleblowers to safely leak information through an encrypted platform. Additionally, they launched a comprehensive mapping of fiscal jurisdiction of oil companies in Nigeria.

The production of informative and qualitative research is at the core of ANCIR’s work. But the organization further recognizes that in order to sustainably support the media ecosystem in the region, they must also address structural issues of investment, training and mentoring of new journalists, providing technical support (such as cybersecurity in Ghana and Nigeria, ethics, forensic investigations, cross-examination) and the legal protection of journalists. Ensuring the security of journalists and their work were overriding factors the organization to pursue a joint project on investigative support via an investigative dashboard, to data, technology, cross-examination, editorial and other experts.

At a regional story camp in Dakar, in partnership with UNODC, ANCIR provided training to more than 40 Sahelian and West African journalists from over 16 countries. ANCIR’s newsrooms members such as Anas Anas (Ghana, Tiger Eye) and Dapo Olayeurunyomi (Nigeria, Premium Times) led to ANCIR spearheading a new regional hub with $100,000 pegged investment from the UNODC, tentatively placed in Burkina Faso. Tech security - by way of encrypted emails and phone numbers – and stringent recruitment, legal and fact-checking processes were also implemented. Finally, given the growing population of West Africa and the tremendous youth bulge, news consumption patterns are changing radically. iLabs has been supporting disruptive technology in newsrooms by embedding developers, journalists and communications personnel to drastically rethink how news and information can be packaged to reach a critical mass of people – notably the youth – but also people outside urban centers or with limited reading capacity.
Turn on the radio in Abuja at 7.30 in the morning any day of the work week and you’re sure to catch the voice of Ordinary Ahmed Isa, the president of the country’s first reality radio show known as Brekete Family (www.breketefamily.com). As he greets his listeners with a familiar, but strange greeting “UNA Hembelembe”, his studio audience reliably responds, “Olololoooo”.

The Brekete Radio Reality Program (BRRP) is an innovative journalistic venture in Nigeria that was created in 1999 as a groundbreaking citizen’s radio platform. Over the years, they have become a fearless and vocal group addressing tough and sensitive governance issues and providing advice and assistance to citizens caught up in their State’s excesses or neglect. It is something of a “clearing house for citizen’s complaints”, airing across five states in the northcentral and northwestern zones. It has over 200 million listeners locally and links up the plaintiffs with relevant government agencies. Since they began over 15 years ago, they have received over 50 million complaints from SMS, letters and phone calls. Some of these complaints were successfully handled, and the program’s producer has himself been arrested by the government over 30 times. The one-hour long program receives more than 40 letters, 1000 SMSs and 1000 phone calls every day.

Brekete Family has become a Mecca of a sort for ordinary Nigerians in distress, especially those from the northern part of the country. They provide an avenue to be heard and hold agencies and organizations to account for gross misconduct or injustice. A blogger once wrote that ‘If more Nigerians fight so selflessly for the rights of the common man and a better Nigeria like this humble gentleman; that dream of a better Nigeria will surely become a reality!’

Over the last year, Brekete Family has positively affected the lives of thousands. An estimated 4335 cases have been treated by Brekete Family through daily discussions on the radio program, fair and effective mediation and through the courts system-usually employed as a last resort. These cases range from human rights violations, involving both government agencies and individuals – some of which are pending, others successfully resolved.

Ordinary Ahmad Isah, a man that has seen it all, at first sight hardly strikes you as a powerful man or a change agent in the context of modern day Nigeria. You would be excused if you did not give him a second look passing in the hallway. But big surprises come in small packages! Beneath his slight frame, harmless looks and soft-spoken manners lies a brave-heart that breaks walls and ceilings as he transforms into a crusader with fire in his eyes.

OSIWA’s Nigeria Country Office Manager, Udo Jude Ilo, recalls some thoughts on one particular Brekete Family episode: “...And so on my morning drive to work, once again the program fails to disappoint. The issue before the Brekete panel this morning is the story of a man who was wrongly dismissed from his job at a government agency for clearly unsubstantiated reasons. Years of approved allowances were still owed and the man had exhausted his meagre savings trying to get the agency in question to pay what was rightfully owed. His story is quite sad and it further epitomizes the frustrated man ready to give up on life.”

“Brekete Family’s host, Ordinary Ahmed, quickly calls the head of this government agency to get his side of the story. When the top official gets on the phone, and just moments after Ordinary Ahmed introduces the issue, the man hangs up. All other attempts to call him back prove unsuccessful. Obviously, the man is not keen on having this particular conversation. But now the fun part: the official’s telephone numbers are announced on air and Nigerians are invited to text and call him until the issue is resolved.

On my way to work the following day, the government official is now on-air providing a public apology to all Nigerians. Apparently his phone has been ringing off the hook. The bombardment of messages nearly caused his phone to breakdown. Suffice it to say, the case of the plaintiff’s overdue entitlements was resolved within weeks.

Perhaps the biggest value that BRRP has added to anti-impunity work in Nigeria is establishing a rallying platform for OSIWA’s grantees, and indeed many NGOs, seeking to engage with Nigerians, educate them on various issues and field questions on issues such as open government and public procurement. These are issues that, ordinarily, the average man on the street may never grasp.”