



Overview



Contributor:
Guy Berger

Guy Berger worked from 2011 to 2022 as a director at UNESCO heading up the Organisation's work to advance press freedom, online and offline. He was previously head of the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University in South Africa, and editor of *South* newspaper in Cape Town.

A CALL TO THE NEXT GENERATION WHY AFRICAN MEDIA HISTORY MATTERS

Reporters record what's happening, providing humanity with a resource for understanding current affairs – and helping explain from whence we come. But journalists not only document history. They also contribute to making it.

Like sunlight cast over the savanna, the light shone by journalism makes things difficult for people who perpetrate harms when they can hide under cover of darkness.

This book documents both sides of the coin – news media recording history, and news media co-making history.

It celebrates real journalism, as distinct from media content that sidesteps the aspiration for truth-telling, and which instead promotes special interests rather than the public interest.

The history presented in these pages vividly reminds us that journalism is continuously in contest with special interests – especially political ones. Almost like the return of seasons, we read about ongoing cycles of clashes between regimes in power and the journalists who stand up for truth-telling. Every African country covered has victories and defeats on both sides, and rich testimonies about the bravery of media lions versus governments.

At the same time, the records we read in these pages give scant attention to how media actors themselves have treated gender, ethnicity, poverty and the environment over the period. Nor

is there much in the way of assessing the individuals and media houses who compromised the profession – and who in some cases even supported political attacks against the right to freedom of expression.

So, the reflections in this book reproduce blinkers of the times. That may be understandable, but it also signals to us that we should learn not only from what is recorded, but also from the gaps. For, if we don't address the hidden and unspoken histories, they will surely haunt and hamstring journalism for decades to come.

Encouragingly, we learn from this book that things can and do change for the better. At the personal level, many of the participants in the original Windhoek conference of 1991¹, succeeded in improving our information environment. And even though some have now passed on, we can remember that while all individuals come and go, journalism continues as an inspiration for communications in the service of democracy, development and human rights. This means that, at the societal level, we can see how the river of history continues its relentless flow – and how the direction taken depends on what successive generations are able to make of shifting contexts and strategic options.

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The march of African media history

Reflecting personally, I was editor of the (now defunct) *South* newspaper in Cape Town, South Africa during the 1991 generation of journalists. This was a time when, in retrospect, we can now see that the end of the Cold War afforded the opening of new windows for journalism across Africa. The result was that fresh air could flow into the stifling and coercive atmospheres that prevailed in many countries.

This was the context in which I was invited to the 1991 Windhoek conference in the then newly independent Namibia. But since someone had to stay home and get the newspaper out, I asked my deputy editor, Rafiq Rohan, if he could go along while I held the fort. He returned home with renewed and continental-inspired enthusiasm for our journalism in those earlier days of the transition to democracy. Still, back then, neither of us could yet see that that Windhoek would turn out to be not just another conference.

Instead, as history unfolded, it became apparent that the event catalysed impetus that led it to become a powerful springboard for positive media reforms worldwide and on the continent.

The impact of Windhoek at global level didn't just happen. Especially, it was the outcome of dedicated efforts by Alain Modoux of UNESCO, amongst others.² This was a person who drove the process of ensuring sister-declarations around the rest of the world - all of them modelled on, and reinforcing, the Windhoek original.

Modoux also worked day and night to ensure the political agreement by UN Member States in 1993 to recognise the conference anniversary of 3 May as World Press Freedom Day. His role as “mid-wife” meant a gift from African journalists

was thus delivered to the globe - and stakeholders worldwide have been able to celebrate the date ever since.

Two decades later, when I had the opportunity to join UNESCO, it was Modoux's work that encouraged me to make the move in 2011.

Back on the African continent, the impact of the Windhoek conference and Declaration paralleled the global impact. It also did not just happen. Instead, it was the outcome of passionate African media people who networked to take the media freedom message to their political overlords and who convinced Western donors to support independent outlets. They also led to UNESCO shifting focus from supporting state-owned media to providing funds to independent media through the Organisation's specialized committee called the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC).³

Over the years, the IPDC also served as the cradle of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, marking its 10th anniversary of impact in 2022⁴. This initiative in turn led to the UN General Assembly proclaiming November 2 each year as the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists.⁵ And in this context, 2021 saw the launch of the African platform for the protection of journalists.

All this was ultimately because people on the ground around Africa took forward the opportunity of the Windhoek Declaration. They ensured that it would not fade into history. One of the many worth mentioning is the late Jeanette Minnie. Her life incarnated the inspiration of Windhoek, with activism across the whole of southern Africa, and the setting up of the Global Forum for Media Development. A course on African media policy has since been created in her memory.⁶

The original Windhoek Declaration, responding to the historical era, focused on private newspapers, and it called for an enabling political environment that would ensure that journalists could work in conditions of (a) press freedom, (b) media pluralism and (c) the independence of newsrooms from political and economic power.

Ten years later, another generation of African media activists adopted the African Charter on Broadcasting⁷, extending Windhoek's three print-based principles to the realm of radio and television, and unleashing the community radio sector across many African countries.

Forward to 2011, and Windhoek's echo then was the Pan African Conference on Access to Information, which I had the honour to help convene on behalf of the Media Institution of Southern Africa, in partnership with Highway Africa and its leader Chris Kabwato. To mark the occasion, I was pleased to edit a publication similar to the current one, titled *Media in Africa: Twenty years after the Windhoek Declaration on press freedom*.⁸ The 2011 conference ultimately led to both the UN General Assembly and UNESCO recognizing 28 September each year as the International Day for Universal Access to Information.⁹ Another gift to the globe with roots in Windhoek 1991.

These three milestones - 1991, 2001, and 2011 – set the media policy agenda across Africa. Much still needs to be accomplished, as this current publication shows. But there has nevertheless been major progress in advancing the conditions for newspapers, broadcasting and the right to information for Africans – including also in the online arena. Only a minority of African governments today refuse to recognise community radio. Laws on access to official information are indeed desperately in need of better implementation¹⁰, but nevertheless today 23 out of 47 countries across the sub-

Saharan region at least have the legislation in place, compared to zero in 1991.¹¹

Today's African journalists can tell African and foreign audiences the continent's current stories, to greater or lesser degrees of relevance, because their predecessors helped make the history which expanded the range of possibilities for them. While the achievements remain uneven and insecure, the making of history continues. For example, African media people continue to push for the scrapping of criminal defamation and for governments to stop their arbitrary arrests and intimidation of journalists.

Looking to the next 30 years

While I did not attend Windhoek 1991, in my UNESCO capacity in 2021 I was privileged to get to the Windhoek+30 conference.¹² Albeit in conditions of Covid 19 social-distancing, it was thrilling to be part of an updated Declaration being adopted there, taking on board the ideas contributed through global consultations that preceded the gathering.

The whole process meant adding to the existing Windhoek foundational principles of press freedom, pluralism and independence. While stressing their continued relevance as beacons for journalism to thrive, the new Windhoek+30 Declaration assessed that three new points deserved to be added for future generations to benefit from journalism as a public good. As a result, the updated Declaration is explicitly gender-sensitive in language and aspiration.

First of the three new points is the principle of support for the *economic viability of the news media*. The chapters in this current book highlight the already precarious state of many African media enterprises over the past three decades. But more recently, competition from social media and the pandemic have worsened things. On top of this, escalating fuel and food prices thanks

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to Russia's war on Ukraine, further underline the urgent need to secure, and to spread, Africa's economic capacity for producing independent journalism. The viability crisis for news cries out for concerted advocacy to build national policy consensus for public funding - and for such funding to be allocated in full transparency and through systems that are future-proofed against media capture.

The second new principle added in 2021 to the original Windhoek Declaration is about the *transparency of the social media companies*. Thanks largely to the efforts of journalists and whistleblowers, we know today that these businesses function to drown out independent news. They use people's data to make profits from carrying diversionary content, disinformation and hate speech. The same companies also do far too little to prevent and punish co-ordinated attacks on journalists and truth-tellers.

Demands that these entities come clean about their algorithmic operations and budgets for moderating content will open the way for concerted pressures, both public and regulatory, for the negative effects to be addressed by real, not just rhetorical, corrective action.

More, if we accept that polluters should pay for clean-up, then these behemoths should be made to spend some of their income to help pay for the journalists who have to increasingly play the role of janitors combatting online junk news. In short, African journalists have a strong interest in advocating for Internet transparency, and in themselves setting the example of how to cultivate and curate content that is really in the public interest.

Thirdly, the Windhoek+30 Declaration includes the principle of building the *public's capacity to deal with the new communications context*. Previously, African journalists could take popular support for

granted – as illustrated in those chapters in this book which recount cases of mass protests against the persecution of the press.

In contrast today, political and other elements (often hiring dubious PR firms) have been successfully weaponizing content in order to turn the public away from, or even against, journalism.

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Meantime, the public at large lack the range of competencies that make up media and information literacy. People are not sure about what is a trusted news source, let alone why facebook, youtube, tiktok and whatsapp services are apparently free – and how user data can boomerang back with surveillance-based manipulation.

One result is there is weak demand for public-interest accountability from Internet and media companies alike. Another is that there are few voices that see value in speaking out in favour of cherishing and defending independent journalism.

In this context, Africa's news media are enjoined by Windhoek+30 to redouble their informal education of the public about today's communications – by word, image and impeccable professional practice. For example, digging into disinformation operations as well as exposing the role of Internet companies complicity are as essential as corruption exposés if the public is to perceive value in what journalism does and why it's worth supporting.

Governments and big tech should also be building media and information literacy through meaningful budgets and programmes – and not least in regard to health and election-related content. It is the

African media that ought to be leading the call for such interventions.

The universal communications values of press freedom, media pluralism and news independence gained huge traction thanks to the original 1991 Declaration. What then for the newly-added points about viability, transparency and communications capacities?

The answer will depend, as it did previously, on the efforts by media people and their allies – globally and in Africa.

Certainly, the climate is ripe:

- Seven months after the Windhoek+30 conference, advocacy efforts led the UN General Assembly to take note with appreciation the Windhoek+30 Declaration within their resolution on the “Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity”.
- The 193 UNESCO Member States went further and unanimously endorsed – on behalf of all their countries - the principles of the new Declaration, based on a resolution tabled by Namibia.
- Then, in mid-2022, the UN’s Human Rights Council directly urged states to take note of the Declaration.

All this amounts to significant ammunition for media in Africa, as well as in other regions, to advocate to parliaments, governments, society and donors, ensuring that Windhoek+30 Declaration maintains momentum and delivers results over the decade.

Yet we all know that crops do not grow simply because seeds are sown. There is need for proactive protection and for active nurturing.

Those who want to see African journalism flourish for the foreseeable future can take

heed of the words in the new Declaration itself.

The relevant passage reads: “This Windhoek+30 Declaration pays tribute to those who opened up this path.” And this text then flows forwards in a direct call to us for action: “Now, let each of us resolve to do our part to help secure information as a public good as an urgent need today, and as a legacy for those who come after us”.

- 1 <https://en.unesco.org/news/30th-anniversary-windhoek-declaration>
- 2 Modoux, A. (2007). From Windhoek to the World. in "50 years of African journalism - African media since Ghana's independence" (eds. Barratt, E and Berger, G). <https://guyberger.ru.ac.za/fulltext/50years.pdf>
- 3 <https://en.unesco.org/programme/ipdc>
- 4 <https://en.unesco.org/un-plan-action-safety-journalists>
- 5 <https://www.unesco.org/en/days/end-impunity-day>
- 6 <https://www.nmt.africa/Resources>
- 7 https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/african_charter.pdf
- 8 <https://action-namibia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Media-in-Africa.pdf>
- 9 <https://www.unesco.org/en/days/universal-access-information-day>
- 10 <https://en.unesco.org/themes/monitoring-and-reporting-access-information>
- 11 Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote D'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, Togo, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe.
- 12 <https://webarchive.unesco.org/web/20220703020251/https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/worldpressfreedomday/2021>

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