

Africa's digital media disruptors 'punching above their weight'

Digital media entrepreneurs are producing ground-breaking journalism and achieving significant impact on their societies, in spite of often tiny budgets and constant online threats and attacks, a new global report revealed.



The [Inflection Point International report](#), published by SembraMedia, a non-profit that supports entrepreneurial journalists in partnership with the global philanthropic organisation Luminate, carried out more than 200 global interviews and interviewed 49 independent digital native media organizations in Africa, in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa.

The researchers found that more than 85% of the media interviewed had contributed to significant political and societal changes, in a report that comes just a month after the award of Nobel Peace Prizes to journalists Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov for their achievements in defending freedom of speech and upholding democracy.

In similar vein, African media entrepreneurs reported achieving civic engagement, criminal investigations, and changes in the law through their articles. Almost half said they were engaged in some form of solutions journalism - compared with 15% in Asia - citing solutions reporting and investigative journalism as key factors in achieving social change.



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New generation of creative media entrepreneurs

“This report shines a light on a new generation of creative and courageous media entrepreneurs, developing solutions to Africa’s social and economic challenges and strengthening the workings of democracy and issues of governance,” said Abdul Noormohamed, director for Africa of Luminare.

The report found that 57% of the African digital newsrooms interviewed had won national awards and 28% had won international awards in recognition of their work. However, they had done so in the face of ongoing harassment, with more than a third reporting cyber attacks on their news platforms.

Some of the entrepreneurs also reported a degree of self-censorship, in avoiding stories that could lead to legal challenges, because they could not afford attorneys to defend themselves. Media in Nigeria and Ghana reported significantly higher incidences of lawsuits and legal attacks than the media organisations interviewed in other countries.

Yet most of the entrepreneurs appear to have survived the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“While there are differences across the three regions, what struck us most as we reviewed the data were the similarities that emerged among these news organisations as they strive to cover their communities and build sustainable business models,” said Janine Warner, cofounder of SembraMedia.

Some of the outlets were established news sites, but many were much smaller, with 60% of the outlets interviewed globally earning less than \$50,000 in revenue.

Top tier digital media

Overall, the African digital media reported higher levels of advertising revenue than Latin American and South-east Asian digital media, with advertising contributing around 29% of incomes for the African media in 2019, falling to 26% in 2020. The top tier digital media on the continent was also found to be earning more for smaller audiences - measured as page views - than equivalent media in Latin America and South-east Asia.

However, the African entrepreneurs had the most limited financial records with around half unable to identify their total revenues or revenue sources. Those that shared financial details were also benefitting from a lower proportion of grants than digital media elsewhere, at 16% of revenue in 2019. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the grants to African media rose, to account for more than 19 per cent of revenues in 2020.



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Stephen King of Luminare said: “This report demonstrates the vital role that grant funding is playing in supporting digital media organisations through this pivotal moment of change. This is not about funding without end - it’s about helping a vibrant new generation of media entrepreneurs to evolve their business models so they can build pathways to sustainability while continuing to produce important journalism in the public interest.”

The researchers also investigated the staffing structures at the media outlets and found that those who employed a staff member to drive revenue earned six to nine times more revenue in 2019 than those who didn’t. Similarly, media with a dedicated tech or innovation lead reported three times higher revenue.

However, fewer of Africa’s digital entrepreneurs were women, at 13%, than in other regions, with 32% of the founders of

the companies studied worldwide being women. But this proportion still represented a far greater role for women in media ownership than exists in the mainstream media, where the ownership by women is as low as one per cent.

The full report is available for [download](#).

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