

Perceptions and Realities in Assessing Media Landscapes

The African Media Barometer (AMB) in Practice

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Introduction

In 2004, the Media Project of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in Africa and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) started developing the "*African Media Barometer*". Our goal was to create a self-assessment instrument based on African standards and a guided discussion among African experts. The resulting reports of the new measurement exercise were to provide FES and our partner MISA with both an analysis of the media landscape in a given country and an advocacy tool for media reforms.

Five years later, the *African Media Barometer* has given us a bi-annual, in-depth and comprehensive description of the media situation in 25 African countries. By the end of 2009, the AMB has conducted 47 assessments, and in six countries already for the third time. Altogether, the discussions and data compiled in these AMB reports provide us with the largest long-term study about the media situation in the African continent.

This short paper reflects on the methodological and practical problems in developing and implementing the *African Media Barometer*. It lists the difficulties overcome and the challenges remaining.

Whatever the continued shortfalls of this particular measurement tool might be, the need for analysing the media landscapes as a prerequisite for effective media development and successful democracy promotion remains beyond doubt.

Analysing Media Landscapes

By 2005, media development had become an accepted instrument in the wider context of democracy promotion. International organisations like UNESCO¹ and the World Bank see a diverse and independent media as a precondition for the effectiveness of their good governance programs. Free media are also increasingly recognized as a powerful change agent.

Yet what was and is hampering the development of effective approaches to media development is a general lack of data in this field. There was the ambitious *African Media Development Initiative*² in the wake of the G8 "Commission for Africa Report" of March 2005. There is a fair number of other studies, like Guy Berger's very useful comparison of "Media Legislation in 10 African countries",³ and there are numerous books and papers on media in particular countries or aspects of the media landscape.

But none of them covers the whole canvas of contradictions that makes up the African media landscape. And most of them will soon be outdated because of the rapid change in communication technology.

Setting out, we also noticed that in their newly designed African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)⁴ on good governance, African leaders had conveniently forgotten to include the media. Attempting to judge each other on democratic progress, they collectively decided to not include the media sector in this enterprise of mutual self-assessment – a telling omission that

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2007): *Defining Indicators of Media Development*, Background Paper, Paris: UNESCO, p.17

² African Media Development Initiative (2006): *Research summary report*, London: BBC World Service Trust

³ Berger, Guy (2007): *Media Legislation in Africa: A comparative Legal Survey*, Grahamstown: Rhodes University

⁴ <http://www.aprm.org.za/>

showed their lack of seriousness on the matter of good governance and media reform.

While African leaders failed at the political level, African civil society recognized and stressed the role of the media in reminding governments of the standards for good governance. The *African Media Barometer* is designed to take the measure of media as the bellwether of democratic dispensation.

We looked at other existing indices for assessing media landscapes. For our purposes, Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press Index*⁵ and Reporters without Borders' *Worldwide Press Freedom Index*⁶ concentrate too much on press freedom violations and not enough on the enabling environment for an independent media.

Compared to these tools, the "*Media Sustainability Index*" of IREX⁷ has a much more sophisticated set of indicators and scores. But it focuses more on the economic sustainability of media than befitted our more political interests. We also decided against adding an analysis by foreign based experts to the AMB, as the *Media Sustainability Index* does.

Such an outside intervention, we thought, would diminish the "homegrown" character and credibility of our instrument. Nobody should be able to refute the self-assessment and analysis of our AMB reports by calling it "foreign interference" in African affairs.

⁵ www.freedomhouse.org

⁶ www.rsf.org

⁷ www.irex.org/MSI/index.asp

Development of the *African Media Barometer*

Matching the needs of FES and MISA with the political context in which we would be working, we came up with the following requirements for our methodology:

- **The AMB could only be a qualitative tool** because we wanted media practitioners and representatives of civil society to debate and assess the media landscape in their own country. We decided that a panel of 10-12 experts, half from the media and half from civil society, could best represent the country concerned. We excluded government and party political representatives from the panel to ensure a critical but constructive debate and avoid political mudslinging or scoring. The ideal panel would represent the urban-rural, geographical, gender, ethnic, language and religious stratification of society – a tall order, as it turned out to be.
- **The AMB had to be a home-grown instrument** to counter the argument that once again Western observers with their own concepts and preconceived notions would be judging African practices on the basis of their own interests. Thus, all the panelists had to come from the respective country.
- **The AMB had to be based on African standards** to allow civil society groups and media practitioners to hold the result of their AMB report against the declaration and protocols signed or accepted by their own governments. Only when the violations of media freedom stand in contrast to African norms can governments be held accountable.

Consequently, we developed 42 indicators as the basis for the discussion and the scoring process from the following

declarations, protocols and principles, all defined on African ground:

- The Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACPR), Banjul, 2002.
 - The Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press, Windhoek, 1991.
 - The African Charter on Broadcasting, Windhoek, 2001.
 - The SADC-Protocol for Culture, Information and Sport, Blantyre, 2000.
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- **The AMB had to reflect the FES/MISA focus on media policy, regulation and public broadcasting** since we wanted information and data for our particular areas of work. As a result we grouped our indicators into four sectors:
 - Freedom of Expression
 - Media Diversity and Independence
 - Broadcasting Regulation
 - Professional and Ethical Standards

 - **The AMB results had to be practical** and define points of entry for FES/MISA and other media or civil society organisations. This required analysing positive and negative developments and recommending strategies to promote media reforms. Only then the AMB could be both an instrument of analysis and a practical tool for advocacy.

Phase I (2005-2007/8)

The final methodology for the first generation of AMBs (2005-2008) can be summarized as follows:

- Every two years, a panel of experts, consisting of at least five media practitioners and five representatives from civil society, meets to assess the media situation in their country.
- For two days, the panelists discuss their national media environment along 42 standardized indicators that are scored in an anonymous vote on the scale from 1 to 5. The indicators are formulated as goals that are derived from African political protocols and declarations.
- If the country does not meet the indicator the score would be one; if the country meets all aspects of the indicator, it would be a 5, the best score possible. If the country meets few, many or most of the indicators it would be a 2, 3, or 4 respectively. The scoring takes place after the discussion and should reflect the personal conclusion each panelist draws from the foregoing exchange.
- The discussion and scoring is moderated by an independent consultant who edits the draft report written by the rapporteur. After the panelists have the chance to comment on the draft and offer suggestions and corrections, the moderator edits the report. Thus, the whole panel has agreed that the report is a fair reflection of the discussion, without necessarily subscribing to each aspect or argument in it.
- In the report, panelists are not quoted by name. Their scoring also remains anonymous. If a participant does not want his or her name to appear as member of the panel for fear of persecution, he can decide to withhold it. The report

will describe his or her professional position in way that protects her identity – e.g, as “a journalist from a state paper” or in similar fashion.

- The final, qualitative report summarises the general content of the discussion and provides the single scores, the average score for each indicator, the average score for each sector and the overall country score. Over time, the biannual reports are measuring the media development in that particular country, and should form the basis for a political discussion on media reform.

Using this methodology for the first generation of the AMB from 2005 to 2008, we covered 23 countries, in 15 of which the exercise was repeated after two years.

With the second reports, mainly in Southern Africa, we generated comparable data over time, contributing to a large body of knowledge about the media situation in the region.

What distinguished the results of the AMB in a positive way from other academic studies of the media situation was the systematic inclusion of the “implementing factor”. Panelists were told to score less the legal but more the real situation, to judge the practice, not the promises. The report would state the legal situation, but also describe the degree or lack of implementation of a particular law, which would be reflected in the scoring.

For example, many academic studies list the number of community radio stations from government lists or UNESCO-reports. The *African Media Barometer* too would state these numbers, but also check them with the collective and practical experience of the panelists. Are these community radio stations still broadcasting? Have they been taken over by the local government as propaganda institutions? What kind of content are they actually broadcasting and how many of them still deserve

the term “community radio”? Report and score would then reflect a reality in which many community radio stations might no longer be what they used or pretended to be.

This inbuilt reality check and the periodic repetition of ABM assessments are its big advantages over similar studies or indices.

Yet there were shortcomings, too:

- Recent developments in communication technology were not reflected in the indicators.
- The discussions were too anecdotal. Sometimes participants could not agree on numbers or were unprepared. Sometimes they quoted from studies that they did not bring or from sources that could not be traced.
- There was the occasional divergence in scoring that could not be explained by differing opinions or a controversial debate. Some panelists did not master the sophisticated phrasing of the indicators. Sometimes they did not understand or agree with the basic assumptions of the methodology. In most cases, this was due to the lack of capacity, particularly among the representatives of civil society.
- In some countries, the rapporteur lacked the necessary skills or proved unreliable, so that the moderator had to step in to write the report.
- The reports themselves were no easy read. Here, too, it turned out to be a real problem for some to summarize the often wide-ranging and emotional discussions into readable paragraphs reflecting the range and gist of the debate.

- The originally envisaged rankings proved untenable, although our attempts at ranking the results produced generally credible tables. Countries like South Africa, Ghana, and Mali led the scores, and Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Swaziland were the bottom countries as far media freedom is concerned.

After going into the details of comparisons of sectors and indicators, however, we decided that the international ranking between countries was methodologically unsound.

It would also be the wrong incentive for our panelists. Knowing that their country would later be compared to the neighbouring states, they could turn chauvinistic instead of being self-critical and honest in their judgments and scoring.

And last, but not least: we could do without ranking because our interest lies elsewhere— namely in looking at developments in one country over time.

The AMB Review (2008)

To a certain extent, these shortfalls are the price to pay for any qualitative analysis based on perceptions and a discursive method. At the same time, any quantitative analysis would produce problems of a different nature. Academic research as currently practiced between Western and African Universities rarely reaches the depth of an elaborate discussion among local experts. Much of its results are as superficial as the results of the *African Media Barometer* are “subjective” as some critics claim⁸.

⁸ UNESCO (2007), *Defining Indicators...*, p.22

The answer to the respective weaknesses of the various methodologies can lie only in the combination of different approaches.

That is exactly what we tried in our review of the *African Media Barometer*: we improved the input of facts and figures into the discussion and we standardized the procedure to reduce the “subjectivity factor” in debating, scoring, reporting, writing and editing. We:

- extended the indicators to cover recent developments in communication technology;
- decided to feed more factual information into the discussion to reduce reliance on anecdotal evidence;
- intensified the training to ensure a better and more reliable performance of the teams of moderator and Rapporteur;
- mandated the presence of an FES-supervisor at each AMB to guarantee quality control;
- added an executive summary to each AMB report, written by the moderator and agreed to by the panelists.

Most of the new tasks assigned are written down in a 20-page “Moderator’s Guide” to ensure a more standardised practice from country to country and year to year.

To improve the presentation and utilisation of the AMB reports, we:

- designed a new layout for the reports, featuring the Executive Summary and improving the sourcing of facts;
- started developing a matrix to show the most important AMB results as an bi-annually updated African overview;

- tested the methodology of the *African Media Barometer* in India and Pakistan to understand if those standards signed and formulated in Africa would “travel” and be accepted in other regions of the world.

And perhaps most important, it became mandatory that all 12 MISA-offices in the SADC-region and all 19 FES-offices in sub-Saharan Africa integrate the result and recommendations of the respective AMB country report into their annual programmes and work. After all, the AMB serves its intended purpose only if the suggestions and solutions of the expert panel are put into practice by media and civil society organisations.

Phase II (2009- ?)

One year after the review of the *African Media Barometer*, the results are as follows:

- 47 AMB-reports in total from 25 African countries;
- Six countries with partly comparable data over three rounds (six years);
- Nine country reports for 2009 with the reworked 45 indicators;
- Two *Asian Media Barometers* as pilot exercises that showed the standards and method to be acceptable in India and Pakistan;
- Two alternative blueprints of a matrix for showing some of the AMB-findings as an overview for the African continent.

Conclusion

The saying “perception is reality” has become commonplace in communication theory. By deriving its results from a discussion of media experts and representatives, the AMB reports are adding perceptions to the measurement of the media situation. If one wants to know if there is freedom of expression without fear, or to what extent self-censorship is practiced, purely quantitative measurements tools are failing to provide the whole picture. And if one also wants to capture the “implementing factor” in assessing the framework of media regulation, only a qualitative analysis will do.

Yielding a regularly updated data set that reflects the actual implementation of media legislation and practices, the AMB takes you closer to reality than most traditional, one-off and supposedly “objective” research methods. The biannual *African Media Barometer* can show progress or setbacks, and help determine agents of change or saboteurs, of media reform.

Based on such an assessment, the panel of experts suggests possible interventions for MISA, FES, other civil society organisations and donors. There should be a straight line from the recommendations of the AMB report to a practical campaign for certain media reforms. In some cases, the panel of experts may form the nucleus of an advocacy group.

With its home-grown and perception-based approach, the *African Media Barometer* was developed as a complementary tool to other ways of measuring media freedom. Since then it has become a valuable addition to the line of indices assessing the media landscape of a given country.

The mining of the “quarry of information” in the growing library of AMB reports will remain an opportunity for the coming years. The *African Media Barometer* should be read as a longitudinal study of the evolving African media landscape, with all its dark shades and bright colours – and with recommendations to be acted upon.