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The Media in West Africa: A Civic Space Emergency



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- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
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THE MEDIA IN WEST AFRICA: A CIVIC SPACE EMERGENCY

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

| | |
|--------------|---|
| IJDES | International Journal of Development and Economic Sustainability, |
| FDI | Foreign Direct Investments |
| MFWA | Media Foundation for West Africa |
| RSF | Reporter Sans Frontière |
| WAJA | West African Journalists Association's |
| USD | United States Dollar |
| AMB | African Media Barometer |
| NPA | National Press Authority |
| MOM | Media Ownership Monitor |
| CSOs | Civil Society Organisations |
| WADR | West Africa Democracy Radio |
| GHs | Ghana cedis |



SUMMARY



The media has played significant roles in amplifying citizens' voices, monitoring public officials' actions and holding governments accountable. These roles played by the media were very instrumental in leading to the democratic transition witnessed throughout the region. Hence, from the 1990s West Africa observed a wave of change which provided an enabling environment for a burgeoning media landscape. However, in recent years, the media has increasingly been facing challenges which are threatening its very existence. It is crucial for stakeholders in the media industry to face these growing challenges and start implementing measures that can help them build strong, resilient and sustainable media organisations that can meaningfully contribute to the democratic journey of the region.



Introduction

The democratic tide that swept across West Africa since the 1990s has improved and strengthened the region's governance architecture. The political stability that marked the period is among the factors that favoured the surge in investment and the significant improvement of economic indicators throughout the region. According to the [International Journal of Development and Economic Sustainability](#), West Africa almost doubled its Foreign Direct Investments between 1990 and 1994.

Thanks to this wave of change, the region witnessed an unprecedented improvement in freedom of expression and of the press which paved the way for a considerable multiplication of media outlets. The media plays an undeniable role in today's societies. It provides news to populations and helps them make informed decisions. By playing its watchdog role, the media establishes democratic check on power, unearths cases of corruption and mismanagement of public resources.

The set of information disseminated through television, radio, print, internet, and mobile phones assists in creating an open and competitive market that represent the backbone of a successful economic architecture. However, in as much as the media contributes to improving our societies, it has fallen prey to a few factors that are threatening its very existence. This paper explores some of the burgeoning threats to the media across West Africa.

It further posits responsive measures that can be taken by different stakeholders to give the media the enabling environment it deserves to serve citizen's interests.



A- THREATS TO THE MEDIA IN WEST AFRICA

Although the media in West Africa is a powerful force for social, economic and political growth, it is plagued with several challenges that mar its efficiency. This paper will explore some of the critical threats faced by the media in the region. These include but are not limited to the shrinking civic space in most West African countries, the existing unprofessional conduct of some media practitioners and the weak financial sustainability of media institutions.

1. The Shrinking Space

With the increase of democratic values and practices across the sub-region, repressive military decrees gave way to constitutional provisions and legislative instruments that are relatively protective of freedom of expression and of the press. Over the years, countries started [repealing criminal](#) prosecutions and defamation libel against media professionals, and adopted draft laws such as the law on access to information. These developments created the suitable environment necessary for the media to better play its watchdog role and serve as citizens' mouthpiece. Media organisations have demonstrated overtime that they can thrive and succeed when operating in a conducive environment. Ground breaking investigations and

broad trans-border collaborations such as the [West Africa Leaks](#) are only possible when journalists work in favourable environments.

The guarantees offered by the constitution, though weak, provide a safety net that allows journalists to dare investigate, expose, and combat arbitrary unlawful actions of some public officials.

However, the once enjoyed safety and freedom of media professionals is under threat as the region witnesses considerable crackdowns on basic rights such as freedom of expression and of the press, and a shrinking civic space. According to [CIVICUS Monitor](#) aside from Cape Verde (which is open), all the other fifteen countries in West Africa have a narrowed or obstructed civic space. There is a growing sense of intimidation and attempts to stifle freedom of expression as media professionals find [their rights](#) curtailed when expressing critical views about governments or political establishments.

Brutal harassments: In 2018, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) [recorded about 8 deaths and 152 violations](#) against media professionals and citizens in four countries in West Africa. These emanated from a series of brutal crackdowns on demonstrators seeking social jus-



tice of one form or the other. In 2019, Ghana recorded the death of an investigative journalist brutally murdered in connection with his work. Other journalists in the country received threats as they enlightened citizens on bad governance practices by the regime.

Internet shutdown: In an attempt to muzzle freedom of expression and of the press, some governments in West Africa are increasingly resorting to internet shutdown. Since 2017, Governments in Togo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Benin resorted to internet shutdown to curb the flow of information among citizens, and to disperse outraged protesters.

Media shutdown: Independent private media houses in some West African countries are intimidated or shut down on the grounds of breach of ethics or defamation. According to the 2018 State of Freedom of Expression, in Burkina Faso, the media is considerably intimidated and crippled with heavy fines and taxes that can only force them to shut down. In 2019, one radio station in Nigeria and two opposition aligned [media houses in Ghana were shut down](#) by the government.

Weak legislation: The media landscape has also recorded major setbacks in terms of legislation. It still faces strong headwinds of criminal libel suits, arbitrary detention and torture. In Nigeria, a Cybercrime Act passed in 2015, [allows law enforcement officers to arrest bloggers and online journalists](#) on grounds of “cyberstalking”. Although there are side reliefs with countries such as Ghana that have recently enacted the law on access to information, about six other countries in West Africa still have a long way to go for their journalists and citizens to have the right to access information. Also, although in countries such as Benin, Ghana, and Guinea there are laws guaranteeing freedom of expression and of the press, the media sector is witnessing considerable crackdown on dissidents and journalists who express critical views.

In Guinea, citizen’s right to protest has come under threat as the government is [increasingly intolerant](#) of dissent voices protesting against constitutional changes that could allow the president to run for a third (3rd) term in office. In a [recent protest](#), the country recorded nine deaths, 70 wounded and 200 arrests.

According to Reporter Sans Frontière (RSF) in countries like [Togo](#), there is a growing practice of self-censorship among journalists, and in [Benin](#) since President Patrice Talon’s election, pro-government reporting guidelines are often sent to the media after cabinet meetings.

2. Low Level of Professionalism among Media Practitioners

In many West African countries, the media is known as the 4th estate. Such an influential position earned by the media is a clear recognition of its critical role and the product of years of quality journalism and production of relevant media contents. Several media veterans admit that journalism and media contents between the 70s and 90s were of higher standards. In recent years, the Media Foundation for West Africa [recorded](#) a sharp decline in professional standards and considerable increase in breaches of the codes of ethics among media practitioners.

The steady [decline in professional standards in the media industry](#) is manifested by poor reportage, partisanship, and constant failure of some journalists to adhere to basic journalism ethical standards. The [2017 African Media Barometer](#) on Togo indicates that many journalists in the country publish unverified information and are unaware of the existence of a Code of Ethics developed by Observatoire Togolais des Médias (Media Self-regulatory body in Togo). The increment in numbers of media organisations sadly does not necessarily translate into an improved quality of reporting. This creeping phenomenon could partly be attributed to the increasing number of non-professionals in the media industry. In Ghana for example, some media houses that have the desire to generate more revenue to face the financial burden of their media organisations rather [employ “crowd pullers”](#) who have the oratory flair yet with no professional training in the field to undertake core journalistic work. Another factor underlining the recorded lack of professionalism in the media industry is the scoop culture. In such a competitive industry where most journalists are hunting information for their outlets, once there is a breaking story, the strong desire for some media organisations to be the first in breaking the news is given more priority, hence information processing stages are sometimes not followed rigorously and the accepted ethical standards in content production are overlooked.

A direct effect of such practices is the constant breach of the journalism code ethics, the production of fake news and biased information, and the proliferation of defamation trials against the media. The growing trend of citizen journalists who sometimes share a lot of fake news and the rise of social media has further worsened the situation and damaged journalists’ credibility.

Today, in countries such as Cote d'Ivoire, Niger, Ghana, and Senegal, increasingly, citizens do not trust the media. According to the [2018 Afro barometer report on Ghana](#), majority of citizens say the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society. The same report highlights that there is a sharp drop-in support for media freedom from 55% in 2005 to 36% in 2017. According to MFWA, this is due in part to perceptions of fallen ethical standards and the rise of corruption in the media landscape.



3. Weak Financial Sustainability of Media Institutions

Severally, media professionals have complained of inappropriate working conditions and poor remunerations. Several journalists in Cote d'Ivoire, according to [the 2010 media sustainability index report](#), are unable to afford transportation to cover events. These legitimate complains gave way to the West African Journalists Association's (WAJA) [regional campaign](#) for the improvement of working conditions and remunerations for journalists.

In countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal and Benin, media practitioners adopted a common agreement with media owners to improve working conditions. However, this has recorded limited results. According to the [2018 African Media Barometer](#) on Benin, despite the adoption of a collective agreement which sets minimum wage for journalists at USD 154, some journalists are still paid USD 80.

Several media owners have also expressed low financial revenue streams, and weak financial sustainability models of the media industry. Also, with digital marketing

that is increasingly taking over traditional media, advertisement budgets directed to the traditional press are gradually dwindling. This further cripple the already weak revenue streams and high cost of operations. Sustaining operations amidst high financial requirements has become daunting for media institutions across the region. This is causing some to shut down due to their inability to pay taxes. In Niger for example, [RSF reported](#) in 2017 the closure of ten media houses for non-payment of taxes.

With low staff salaries and the poor working conditions, the media landscape is recording a staggering turnout rate of professionals who decide to take up jobs in other professional sectors. The combination of poor professional practices and low salaries leads to a tendency towards mediocrity. This could further make journalists to be more vulnerable to corruption.

In Cote d'Ivoire, for example, [the media landscape is highly polarised](#). Media organisations affiliate themselves to political parties that fund their operations. In the country, there are green newspapers (journaux verts) aligned with the ruling party, and the blue newspapers (journaux bleu) aligned with the former president Laurent Gbagbo's political party. According to the media regulatory body (National Press Authority (NPA), [most breaches](#) of the journalism code of ethics are perpetrated by politically affiliated newspapers. In 2012, Ibrahim Sy Savané, President of the national media regulatory body in Cote d'Ivoire, said "for the media [to survive](#), it needs to maintain close ties with a political party which has militants and an audience of a certain size". Several media houses in Senegal, Ghana, Niger, Benin, are no exception to this reality. According to the [Media Ownership Monitor](#) for example, one third of media in Ghana has a political affiliation. This situation has crippled the independence of editors and turned the media industry into a tool used by some political and business cronies to satisfy their individual aspirations. This context in which the media is operating today is highly marked by the concept of "media capture". This refers to media systems that have become tools of the ruling economic and political elites. The dependence of media houses to political and economic bigwigs can be attributed to the media's financial vulnerability, hence, a survival tactic.

The growing phenomenon of weak financial sustainability is threatening the very existence of credible media industries across the region. Key stakeholders in the media are witnessing the industry's independence being sacrificed on the altar of access to funds.



B- THE WAY FORWARD

Considering the increased number of violations perpetrated against media practitioners, and the set of challenges facing the media industry, swift, robust and practical actions must be taken. There is therefore a need for media stakeholders to put into action the following proposed measures.

1. Media freedom advocates:

- **Build an advocacy coalition for freedom of expression and of the press:** Most gains in expanding civic space have been obtained when key stakeholders decided to put aside their differences and fight for a common cause. Media stakeholders and sympathisers should build a network that leverages on each other's strengths. This collaboration can help in proactively countering measures aimed at curtailing the rights of the media and constitute a body that advocates for veritable freedom of the press throughout the sub-region.

2. Academics:

- **Improve the training curriculum:** Contemporary information dissemination is facilitated using social media and the new phenomenon of citizen journalists. To make traditional media stay relevant and highly competitive, it is

important that training modules are improved upon. The curriculum on journalism should be adapted and strengthened to build strong foundations for the professionalism of journalists in information gathering, processing and dissemination in line with the journalism code of ethics.

- **Include in journalists' trainings business related courses:** Media professionals need to learn more about the business aspect of their work and how to adapt the media to the business environment. For the media industry to survive, it is imperative for future journalists to have basic understandings in business. This can help in tackling the financial sustainability challenge aspect and producing robust and visionary 'journalpreneurs' (journalist entrepreneurs) who can contribute to establish innovative business-oriented ideas for their media houses.

3. Media:

- **Partner with CSOs:** As a major actor in the civic space the media can align its expertise to support specific agendas of some CSOs and show their relevance and added value in supporting development initiatives. Through this, media institutions can forge alliances with CSOs and instead of being invited on punctual basis to cover events, they would be integrated fully into projects and their related costs fully covered to guarantee sufficient media coverage that pro-

motes the project goal and disseminates project results to create increased awareness and possible impact. An example of such is the partnership between Media Foundation for West Africa and SUD FM in Senegal where the radio is a partner in a project that seeks to enhance citizens' participation in governance and demand for accountability. Also, through this partnership, media organisations can have easy access to studies reports developed by CSOs. By relying on such reports, media organisation can curb the growing trend of defamation in the media industry and improve on their professionalism by providing factual and evidence-based information which could back their contents.

• **Develop projects/programmes to address social issues:**

The media must re-invent itself and go beyond publishing/broadcasting the news. As part of the civil society fraternity the media should develop social development approaches while leveraging on their mission and expertise to achieve goals. That way, they can apply for funding to cover elections, corruption issues – social accountability, education, oil and gas, youth and women empowerment etc. By so doing the media can explore its untapped potentials, have some finances to cover the costs of competent staff and reduce dependence on political and economic influencers. A regional media institution, the [West Africa Democracy Radio](#) has adopted this approach. It is implementing a project to strengthen the media's capacity to curb the migration menace in some West African countries and this is being supported with funds from the German Embassy in Dakar.

• **Be innovative:** The media should be more creative in designing programmes that can respond to social issues and generate revenue for them in addition to funds raised through advertising. For example, Citi FM in Ghana initiated the War Against Indiscipline – a project to name and shame road defaulters while supporting the police and road control agencies to identify road traffic defaulters, fine them and collect the fines while instilling discipline in road users. In the first six months, the project [accrued to the state](#) over GHs 258,000. Considering the impact of such initiatives, there is a need for the media industry to brainstorm, identify and develop innovative strategies that will enable them to stay relevant and financially capable of delivering on their mandate.

4. Media development organisations:

• **In-house trainings for non-professionals and professionals:** Individuals who can practice journalism without having received formal trainings must imperatively receive short intensive courses in journalism with a special focus on ethical standards. Media houses should also ensure that they support (financially or by granting study leave) their

journalists to take refresher courses to learn new techniques in the profession or update their skills. Media houses could also organise in-house trainings based on specific needs which could be cost effective and benefit more staff.

• **Develop a mentorship system between the former generation of journalists and the young professionals:**

One of the challenges that the region faces and Africa as a whole, is the intergenerational gap. There is a need to bring the older generation closer to the new one. This will allow the older generation to not only mentor the new one but instil in them the sense of principles, identity, compliance with the code of ethics, and courage in pursuing the truth. This practice will enable the older generation to transfer the value sets that are indispensable in building confidence in the public.

• **Develop the institutional capacities for the media:**

Media development institutions must also focus on developing the institutional capacities of media organisations across the region. This is vital for media houses that demonstrate a need for such support. This is crucial in guaranteeing the institutional sustainability of the media across the region. Support can be provided by developing and rolling out training modules for managers, development of efficient human resource, administrative and financial policies and systems, among others.

• **Assist the media in developing financial sustainability models:**

Financial sustainability represents a serious threat to the very existence of independent media in the region. Media development organisations must assist the media in developing financially sound business models, marketing plans, and innovative methods of generating resources. Media development organisations can also assist in rolling out systems that could help the media to tap into the digital space to generate revenue to support their work.





CONCLUSION

The media landscape today is at a crossroad where it needs to redefine itself. It is crucial for CSOs, activists who defend freedom of expression and of the press, and academics to undertake key steps to facilitate the resurgence of an enabling environment for the media to operate in. The nature of the actions undertaken will determine whether the years ahead are spent in fighting against the reversal of the rights earned or stepping forward and building a strong and resilient media industry. Media stakeholders need to quickly redefine and actively uphold their roles to adapt to the ever-changing environment in order to face the daunting future. But can they find the courage, and the tools needed to fight these growing and complex problems?

“The growing trend of citizen journalists who sometimes share a lot of fake news and the rise of social media has further worsened the situation and damaged journalists’ credibility”

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