

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 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 been held 47 times, in six countries already for the third time. All together 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 tries to reflect 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 are seeing 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.

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

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” from 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 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 given 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 propagated self-assessment – a telling omission that showed their lack of seriousness on the matter of good governance and media reform.

Where African leaders failed at the political level, we wanted at least civil society to recognize and stress the role of the media in reminding governments of the standards for good governance. The *African Media Barometer* is just that – taking the measure of media as the bellwether of democratic dispensation.

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

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/>

⁵ www.freedomhouse.org

⁶ www.rsf.org

Compared to these tools the “*Media Sustainability Index*” of IREX⁷ has a much more sophisticated set of indicators and scores. But it focusses more on the economic sustainability of media as 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 a “foreign interference” into African affairs.

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 debating and assessing 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 panel should 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 interests. Thus, all the panelists had to come from the respective country.

⁷ www.irex.org/MSI/index.asp

- **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 violation of media freedom stands 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

- **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 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 such:

- 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 own country.
- For two days they discuss their national media environment along 42 predetermined indicators on which they have to score in an anonymous vote on the scale from 1 to 5. The indicators are formulated as goals which 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, which is 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 foregone exchange.
- The discussion and scoring is moderated by an independent consultant who edits the draft report written by the rapporteur. After the panelists had the chance to comment on the draft and hand in 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 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. Then the report will just describe his or her professional position in an uncompromising way – 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 we received comparable data over time contributing to a large body of knowledge about the media situation mainly in Southern Africa.

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”. Panellists were told to score less the legal but the real situation, to judge the practice not the promises. The report would state the legal situation, but then describe the degree or lack of implementation of a particular law which then would also be reflected in the scoring.

Whereas many academic studies would just list the number of community radio stations from government lists or UNESCO-reports, the *African Media Barometer* would also state these numbers, but check those with the collective and practical experience of the panellists. 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 continuous character of the ABM turned out to be 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 which 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. Sometimes panellist 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 writing 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 and tried ranking proved untenable. Although our attempts at ranking the results produced generally credible tables with countries like South Africa, Ghana and Mali leading the scores and Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Swaziland being the bottom countries as media freedom is concerned.

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

It would also be the wrong incentive for our panellists. 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 und African Universities does

hardly go to 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.

The answer to the respective weaknesses of the various methodologies can only lie 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
- We decided to feed more factual information into the discussion to reduce anecdotal evidence
- We intensified the training to ensure a better and more reliable performance of the teams of moderator and rapporteur
- We mandated the presence of an FES-supervisor at each AMB to guarantee quality control
- We added an executive summary to each AMB-report, written by the moderator but agreed to by the panellists

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
- We have started developing a matrix to show the most important AMB-results as an biannually actualised African overview
- We 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

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

And perhaps most importantly: we made it 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-report into their annual programmes and work. After all, the AMB only serves its intended purpose 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 from 25 African countries in total
- 6 countries with partly comparable data over three rounds (six years)
- 9 country reports for 2009 with the reworked 45 indicators
- 2 *Asian Media Barometers* as pilot exercises which 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 a common place 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, once off and supposedly “objective” research methods. Through

the biannual holding of the *African Media Barometer* progress or setbacks can be shown, agents of change or saboteurs of media reform can be determined.

Based on such an assessment the panel of experts suggests possible points of 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 can form the nucleus of an advocacy group.

With its home-grown and perception-based approach the *African Media Barometer* was developed as a complimentary 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 a challenge for the coming years. In the end the *African Media Barometer* should be read as a continuous study of the African media landscape with all its dark shades and bright colours – and with its recommendations to be acted upon.