

Tanzanian blogs provide the untold stories

As internet connections increasingly sweep the African continent and traditional news sources continue to battle repressive governments and financial hardship, blogs have taken on new meaning. They are not mere online personal diaries, but rather, blogs are a burgeoning grassroots platform that can serve both new and shifting audiences with respected and dependable news.

Tanzanian journalist and blogger Ansbert Ngurumo spoke with the African Press Network for the 21st Century (RAP 21) about how blogs fill vacuums in the African media scene. The way he sees it, blogs are redefining what it is to be a journalist in Africa.

RAP 21: When and why did you start blogging and what do you blog about?

Ansbert Ngurumo: I started blogging in March 2004. My first article was on saving human lives by observing simple rules of hygiene. It was published on my weekly column Maswali Magumu (Tough Questions) in the Sunday edition of Mwananchi newspaper on March 30, 2004. I wanted to keep a soft copy to let more people have access to it, because at that time Mwananchi newspaper did not have a website.

Four months earlier, I had won an award in Switzerland, for critically analysing how Tanzania was becoming an information society. And the winning article, 'An information society without involvement?', had been published by the same paper and column in September 2003, after I attended a training with Highway Africa at Rhodes University, South Africa, on journalism and the information society. I later amended this article and blogged it.

My serious blogging, however, started in July 2005 when I created a new, better-looking blog [www.ngurumo.blogspot.com] known as Utakapoju. Utakapoju - meaning knowledge begins with our admission of our ignorance. In the beginning, I posted my articles along with those of other



writers that I thought were worth keeping.

Most of my newspaper articles — critical, opinionated analyses of my society's socio-economic and political issues — are published on my blog.

Generally, though, my blog publishes everything that can help to instigate the inquisitive mind of a reader. It mainly carries local stories for Tanzanians, and some important events and issues from elsewhere in the world.

My choice of language, Swahili, was meant to inspire readers to beat myths about technology and language. To me, like to many others, technology has no language. People can communicate and blog in any language. It is better to do it in a language known best to users. Swahili is a growing language spoken by hundreds of millions throughout the world. It is Tanzania's national language through which any meaningful communication to, and among, Tanzanians can be done effectively.

RAP 21: You have spoken about the "poverty of the media" in Africa amidst a larger discussion of tackling socioeconomic poverty across the continent. What role, or rather how much impact, do blogs in Africa have in regards to empowering the media and eradicating poverty?

Ngurumo: If I were to expand on the notion of the

poverty of the media in Africa, I would insist on two main points. Firstly, most of the media in Africa lack the financial muscle that would help move issues and push agendas forward. Journalists work harder and longer hours — and sometimes risk their lives — but most of them do not have enough financial security.

Secondly, media practitioners have professionalism but they lack real freedom and powers to execute their duties without fear of favour of politicians and businesspeople. Legal frameworks in most African countries are repressive and unfriendly to investigative, objective journalism. This explains why most of the best stories are still uncovered.

Few journalists have the guts to defy these political and financial threats; and fewer still have the integrity it takes to shake corrupt systems that have tainted the image of some of them. The media can strive to work hard, but they cannot go further. They cannot dig deeper. They are still in chains. The starting point in tackling poverty on the continent would be to unchain the media. Only when they are free enough can they be strong to champion a course against poverty of others.

Blogs are one of the ways journalists and citizens in general can free themselves from the yoke of draconian government laws. So far, governments have been a proved failure when it comes to

controlling blogs. They do not require registration by governments, and they do not need experts in journalism. They need passionate, informed writers. Everyone can blog. Better still, blogs can help one publish the 'un-publishable' — that which is normally censored, sifted and left out in ordinary newspaper journalism. One can also store any information to make it available for future use. Unlike print works, blogs can be accessed online from anywhere.

Blogs have been very effective tools in exposing corruption. Tanzania is a case in point. Since 2007, widespread corruption by high profile government officials has been uncovered thanks to the work of bloggers. The laws in Tanzania prohibit reporters from exposing certain information through mass media. But the same laws cannot stop people from sharing the same information on their blogs.

Stories that would never have been written in newspapers are being blogged and circulated to millions of people, empowering the society with vital information they had been craving for decades. The young generation — calling itself a dot.com generation — is at the helm of this innovative use of new media. To them, blogs are more appealing than newspapers, and through them, the youths have been more actively involved in the civic challenges of their nation than ever before. This testifies to the power of blogging.

RAP 21: Is blogging the new journalism?

Ngurumo: Yes and no — it depends on the school of thought to which one belongs. To conservative, traditionalist thinkers, blogging is not journalism at all because it lacks the professional line that distinguishes a trained journalist from an ordinary person who can read and write.

But flexible and pragmatic thinkers have a different approach. To them, journalism is a natural art for every human being. It is an expression of the human urge to communicate — which is a natural endowment. Everyone can gather information and share it with others, although some people

are more given to it than others, and some are trained to do it.

So, where is a line between their journalism and blogging careers? In the current debates about citizen journalism and journalism for citizens, blogging gives an interactive characteristic to the practice that makes journalism belong to the people, not to professionals. We may not have a common ground on the issue, but to some of us, blogging is a modern development and simplification of journalism.

RAP 21: Do a lot of people in Tanzania read blogs and why do you think people turn to them as a source for news?

Ngurumo: Relatively, yes, they do. Of course, no quantitative research has established this fact. The general view is that most people still read newspapers more than they read blogs because not everyone has access to the internet. But Tanzania is one of the countries with a growing digital industry, and the cheapest Internet connection costs. More people are beginning to access internet, and therefore, are reading blogs. A general myth is that blogs have deeper and more reliable information because it is uncensored.

Newspapers censor themselves before they are censored by authorities. Most of the information found on blogs comes from newsrooms where it has been sifted and left out — not because of its falsity but because it is regarded too sensitive to publish — it would lead to the government pouncing on authors, editors, publishers and printers or even closing down a media outlet.

Besides, blogs publish faster and earlier than newspapers. Those who want to get news earlier depend more on blogs. So, those who can access them, whether by mobile phone or using their computers, would rather read blogs than buy newspapers.

RAP 21: What are your hopes for the future of the African blogosphere?

Ngurumo: Africa's information era looks promising. The engine to drive this revolution is the enthusiasm already exhibited by the young generation of bloggers. Of all bloggers I know in Africa, 97 percent are youths. To them, blogging is a generational challenge meant to prove right a notion that young minds can lead the information society in media innovation.