



Revolution in Tunisia and in the African Media

by Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Trevor Ncube, Co-Chairs of the African Media Initiative (AMI)

Tunisia, the source and inspiration of the Arab Spring, witnessed a significant milestone in the growth of the African Media Initiative (AMI) and the maturity of African media last week.

When we chose Tunis as the fourth venue for our flagship program, the African Media Leaders Forum (AMLF), it was with the clear intention of positively exploiting their revolution to enhance our program of creating a revolution in the management of African media. Social media played a significant role in the extraordinary developments that launched the Arab Spring, and it was with the idea of exploring the implications of social media for Africa that we titled our annual gathering: Empowering Citizens Through Social Media and Technology Adaptation: What Future For Traditional Media?

As our CEO, Amadou Mahtar Ba said: “Our meeting in Tunis was a way of paying tribute to ordinary citizens whose courage and hunger to have a say in how they are governed and by whom unleashed a revolution to restore justice and accountability. And that is at the core of media's responsibility: to ensure citizens have the kind of information they need to achieve those ends.”

To be sure, revolutions in the past have happened without social or even traditional media. And, no doubt in time, Tunisians and the citizens of the other countries of the Arab Spring would have eventually thrown off the yoke of oppression. As the American civil rights martyr, Martin Luther King, Jr. often said: No lie can live forever.”

But there is no question that social media accelerated the Arab uprisings and in most cases, limited the human toll that sometimes accompanies revolutions, as we are seeing, alas, in Syria. But that, thankfully, is the exception.

Since our last AMLF meeting in Cameroon, which concentrated on helping African media owners develop more effective business models, we have concentrated on concrete projects that would take AMLF closer to the goal of developing a media sector that would help citizens affect social, economic and political change, not least holding their leaders accountable. Social media has become key in realizing those goals. So we held workshops that gave experts time to explore the possibilities of the new technologies. And the Tunis AMLF declaration emphasized the need to continue focusing on improving professionalism, management, content and timeliness of reporting by harnessing the strengths of media technology.

The declaration acknowledges that “deficits in democracy and governance are inimical to the growth of Africa's media sector.” But the body applauded and



endorsed AMI's core principles of ethics and principled leadership. Our plan now is to get media associations around the continent to endorse the principles that promote ethics and best practice now being circulated among them. Already the Tanzania Media Owners Association has endorsed these principles.

What encourages our efforts to strengthen African media is that we are clearly growing from strength to strength. From an attendance of 50 at our first meeting in Dakar, Senegal 4 years ago, we have grown to a record 350 from 48 African countries at our Tunis meeting.

We are committed to building on the solid foundation of action and innovation we have laid. And we intend to see that the ideas that drove the Arab Spring also create the kind of revolution in African media that will truly empower Africa's people, giving them the freedom, justice, prosperity and equality they so richly deserve.