



AMI Press Release

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Media Leaders Roundtable on Open Data and the Future of News

Kenyan media owners and open governance advocates resolved this week to urgently establish a national task force to promote data-driven journalism.

The industry-led task force will explore practical ways for the media to tap into the government's pioneering Kenyan Open Data Initiative (KODI), as well as help the media pilot practical projects in newsrooms that seek to improve the quality of reportage and citizen engagement in public discourse.

Chief executives and board directors of Kenya's largest media groups made the call for an industry-wide drive to evaluate new digital journalism tools during a strategy roundtable jointly convened by the African Media Initiative (AMI) and World Bank Institute (WBI) at the Intercontinental Hotel, in the capital Nairobi, on Tuesday.

The gathering was opened by Kenya's Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Information and Communications, Dr Bitange Ndemo, who noted that although Kenya was the first sub-Saharan African nation to release large quantities of government-held data, there had been limited use by the media, technologists, or wider population of the 350 detailed datasets offered by KODI on public expenditure, demographic trends, and service delivery.

"The KODI initiative provides the foundation for a knowledge economy. It also gives you the material and the tools to be more scientific in your reporting on issues. Evidence-based analysis by the media is more likely to influence the manner in which [government] decisions are made and policies are orientated than purely speculative reporting," Dr Ndemo told the media executives.

"Data journalism therefore strengthens the media's ability to focus its reportage on the real issues, instead of just the personalities."

The World Bank's Nairobi-based senior social development specialist, Christopher Finch, added that Kenya's release of government data six months ago, via a centralised open data portal, is already being emulated by countries as far away as Moldova. Finch urged Kenya's local media to embrace KODI as a key tool to improve the depth and context in reportage. He also urged the media to build their own tools or platforms to help the wider public use KODI data in their day-to-day lives to understand the society they lived in.

AMI's digital strategist, Justin Arenstein, told the media executives that data-driven journalism would not just improve the quality of reportage – it is also good business. He said media executives readily understood the argument for using externally produced data, such as the data released by the World Bank or Kenya's government. But, what most media owners and executives are still grappling with is the argument that newsrooms themselves should be opening up their editorial archives for 3rd parties to use as 'open data' content in everything from mobile apps, to web-based services.

“Media invest massive amounts of money to create original content, and then only use the material once or twice before archiving it. Some media in Kenya have archives going back 100 years or more, including film, audio records and photographs of events that have shaped the nation,” Arenstein explained, who is a Knight International Journalism Fellow currently assisting AMI on digital strategies. “But very few media have the resources or in-house tech skills to extract fresh value from their content – especially in the current economic climate. The material is, however, a goldmine for external 3rd party developers and entrepreneurs who would happily carry the cost and the risk to develop new digital platforms that use the content. They would then share any resulting revenue with the media.”

The *Guardian* newspaper in the UK has already claimed early successes, Arenstein said, with its Open Platform that allows external developers to use everything from food recipes to football scores in the newspaper as 'feed stock' for independent apps or web services.

Arenstein warned, however, that archival material only has value if it is properly digitised and is machine-readable, with enriched meta-data that explains the detailed contextual information about the people, entities and places in each piece of news. He also warned that research protocols, workflow processes, and knowledge management would need to change substantively in newsrooms to ensure that news reports are formatted as 'structured data' that can be automatically repurposed or reused by 3rd party apps.

“These are not easy changes, but they will help media create new revenue streams and will help to diversify the media's revenue base away from pure advertising models,” said Arenstein.

AMI chief executive, Amadou Mahtar Ba, hailed the formation of a national task force on data-driven journalism and said it would allow Kenyan media owners and executives to identify possible pilot projects, as well as commission research of the most locally appropriate use-cases. AMI will facilitate the task force.

“Kenya could serve as a media lab for the whole of Africa. When we find models that work here, we could scale them across the continent. The Kenyan lessons will also help us shape training for news managers and media executives, and will help us lead similar strategic discussions elsewhere on the continent,” said Mahtar Ba. “And, if the experiments convince media to open up their own content, plus similar information held by civil society, we will have helped kickstart a knowledge economy across Africa.”

Other AMI initiatives that are designed to support digital experimentation include:

- The \$1 million African News Innovation Challenge (ANIC), which offers cash grants of up to \$100,000 each for pioneering projects that have the potential to improve the way that media operate on the continent.
- A rollout of HacksHackers chapters across Africa, to bring together journalists (hacks) with technologists (hackers) for monthly meet-ups to collaborate on digital experiments designed to rethink the way that journalists gather, report, and disseminate the news.

AMI is the continent's largest umbrella association of African media owners, top executives and other key industry stakeholders. AMI's mandate is to serve as a catalyst for strengthening media on the continent, by building the tools, knowledge resources, and technical capacity for African media to play an effective public interest role in their societies.

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