

African opportunities in the digital era

ACCRA: The 2009 Africa Media Leadership Conference took place 4 - 7 October 2009 in Accra, Ghana. The media summit hosted 100 CEOs and editors-in-chief of African media who debated how their companies could harness and monetise youthful audiences, who are increasingly using mobile phones and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter to communicate and access news and information.



Linus Gitahi, group
chief executive
officer of Nation
Media Group

Youthful audiences consuming media using digital channels are not interested in identifying with their countries or ethnic groups and are likely to fashion their own language of communication, African media executives heard during the conference.

“The digital natives will not identify with their tribes, less with their country, but more with the interests of their virtual communities,” said Linus Gitahi, group chief executive officer of Nation Media Group which has multimedia operations in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Referring to concerns expressed by some delegates that African languages were under threat because of ‘new (informal) languages of communication’ being fashioned by today’s youths, Gitahi said the advent of digital channels of communication and the lifestyles they had unleashed were unstoppable and urged his peers to live and thrive in these conditions.

This was the main thrust of the conference, which ran under the theme of “Learning from the future: Africa’s Media Map in 2029”. The summit is hosted annually by Rhodes University’s Sol Plaatje Institute for Media Leadership (SPI) and Germany’s Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS).

The conference is a platform for African media executives to meet, network and discuss key management and leadership challenges confronting the continent. This year’s conference was attended for the first time by delegates from Egypt, completing the pan-African nature of the series.

Frank Windeck, head of KAS's media programme for sub-Saharan Africa, and SPI director Francis Mdlongwa, urged the delegates to break away from conventional management thinking and practice which conditioned managers to lead organisations in conditions of stability, predictability and regularity.

“This is because our real world out there is no longer stable, certain or predictable,” they said in a joint statement, noting that “the usual business plans, business maps and strategies” used by firms were no longer adequate in dealing with today’s “frenetic, complex and ambiguous challenges of our era of profound and rapid change”.

They added: “The traditional solutions of trying to replicate and imitate successful companies and of hoping to learn from their ‘magic’ maps and strategies are dead. This is because we live in an age increasingly bounded by chaos and some semblance of order. Today’s media leaders must therefore seek out novel maps, novel routes and novel destinations that mark business success by managing the unknowable.”

The four-day summit debated a range of topics crucial to the survival of Africa’s media in the digital age. There was near unanimity that mobile phones are the media of the future and that African media companies need to find innovative ways of harnessing these to tap into the youth market.

Other major topics discussed at the conference included the growth of broadband in Africa; the challenges of running a social media network in Africa; the role of youth in the news generation process; how traditional media companies could embrace social media networks and leverage them for their businesses; how traditional media could handle user-generated content and the kinds of content that appeal to youths; and the educational role of traditional media in digital media-scape.

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