

## Building a digital media network focused on African storytelling

It's been a two-year breathless roller coaster going from 'Big Name Global Corporation' to 'Just Me LLC'. After an amazing 14 years at CNN and magnificent personal and professional life experiences, it was time to reinvent myself. I was at the top of my game, but I had flatlined. There was no more growth. I needed inspiration. I needed to regain a sense of control. I joined CNN at 25. I was 40. I could no longer see a clear path forward.

By [Zain Verjee](#) 12 Aug 2016



Zain Verjee

The only avenue where I felt in charge of myself was writing. I was accepted into a two-year Masters program in Creative Writing at Oxford University. It offered me a psychological outlet in prose and poetry, which also allowed me to pivot professionally and seek an alternative path forward.

Months after leaving CNN, there was a moment of deep dread when I realised reinvention was not simply hitting reset. Revival does not come without the hard work of self-reflection, stripping away self-perception standing naked in front of your fragile self and determining a meaningful course forward.

The transition to being an entrepreneur has been tough. After all, who would I really be in the world without the power of a recognisable brand by my face? I've always needed it to define myself, I thought. I've learnt that I do not.

There were many times I was sure I would sink. While stuck in quicksand, I questioned my choices dozens of times. I was throwing myself off a cliff into a technology start up, that almost all those who loved me told me not to pursue, and instead recommended that I parlay global recognition and my Rolodex into lucrative contracts. After all, I had no idea how to do it. That part was accurate.

But my passion trumped my fear. A desire to realise a vision was stronger than all the scepticism thrown my way. A belief in my own ideas became more important than executing someone else's. I would rather try and fail, than not try at all.

Each day brings with it a large dose of self-reflection, self-motivation, self-flagellation and self-doubt. The range of skills, discipline, and steely self-belief called into play in building a start up from the trenches has been mind-blowing. The extent of loneliness involved in this enterprise has been harsh.

Leading a TV show team was not leading a business. I knew I wanted to build a digital media network focused on African storytelling. What was it exactly, what gap were we addressing specifically, and what was the business model?

## Launching aKoma Media

An incredible core team has built [akomanet.com](http://akomanet.com). It is an Africa-focused content and storytelling platform. We are fostering a community where a combination of user-generated content and original content about Africa and its diaspora is being created, published and shared with the world. We want to capture the diverse and creative energy of the continent, and from our own local African perspectives.

We have built a content management system called Myst (My Studio) that allows for easy content creation on mobile phones for video, writing, photo storytelling and audio podcasts.

We have developed our own talent network called 'Tribe', where we nurture talent and give them our expertise to develop their skills. We provide the canvas for their work.

Creating aKoma has taken patience, something I have had to learn. I have ditched reading novels for books like, 'The Lean Start Up'; 'Creativity Inc.'; and 'Traction'. I've had to understand market size, value propositions, the lean canvas; digital product development tools such as pivotal tracker; data analytics; hero images; legal releases; marketing plans; and much more. It's been terrifying. It has been exciting. It has been all consuming.

Here's what I learned about reinvention:

- It takes time to re-define who you are again. I had to be gentle with myself. I had many different conversations with individuals of varying disciplines all of which informed my thinking.
- Purpose becomes an option. There's a lot of soul searching in a transition period. What makes me happy? What do I really want? Why do I want it? My old world was no longer there, so if I could reconstruct the ideal world for myself, what would it look like? I wanted a confluence of purpose and passion.
- You never know who is around the corner. I struggled to work out how to build this vision alone. Almost one year after leaving TV, I was introduced to Chidi Afulezi, a CNN alum, and digital product guy who is on the frontlines with me. I am fortunate to have a co-founder who is ambitious, a risk taker, pig-headed but with a gentle manner, and who challenges me every day. We cheer and despair together.
- Self-doubt is OK. Co-existing with lack of certainty becomes the norm. It takes time to get used to limbo, but it's not the end of the world.
- There are high highs and low lows. These were (and are) difficult and I simply had to move through it. It's easier with close friends and family, and a nice bottle of wine.
- You learn to deal with rejection. Not everyone gets the vision. Not every person wants to take a risk with you. 'No' isn't personal.

aKoma comes from a Ghanaian symbol, that means 'heart'. That's what we want our creators to bring to the aKoma community. We want every single African content creator who has something to say, something to

show, a viewpoint to take, to come and create on aKoma. It's our job to bring it to the world.

This is a new phase for aKoma, and I know that whatever I learn, I will learn by doing.

*Source: African Media Agency (AMA).*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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