

The role of the media in the implementation of NEPAD and the African media's perception of progress in NEPAD

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While travelling in Algeria some time ago, I asked a taxi driver jokingly if he might consider reducing my fare in the spirit of NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development). With Algeria being one of the five initiating countries of the programme, I assumed he would know what I was referring to. But instead he asked, puzzled, "Who is NEPAD?"

On my frequent travels around Africa, I often ask people what they think of NEPAD. The question is often met with puzzled faces. Those who do know of NEPAD often ask what is happening with it, while some dismiss it with a wave of the hand.

These responses are not necessarily a reflection of the lack of activity in NEPAD but they certainly are a reflection of the way it has been communicated to the African public over the past four years. The early euphoria surrounding the notion of African renaissance and the launch of NEPAD was all over the media, in Africa and elsewhere. Everyone seemed to buy into what it represented and what it aimed to achieve, despite some cynicism about the failure of previous initiatives to put Africa back on the global map. But, four years on, one could argue that NEPAD is perceived to have become something of a damp squib, certainly in media terms, and has been saved from relative obscurity only by a recent revival of interest on the back of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

I would argue that the insistence on African unity at all costs as the principle underpinning NEPAD, which precludes the notion of divisions among countries on issues and thus lessens the potential for healthy debate, is one factor that has led to waning interest in the subject.

Many who know what NEPAD is and what it is supposed to do are asking what it has done. The NEPAD Secretariat, and the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA) would say it has done a lot. Heads of state would concur. But what about everyone else?

Little has been done to involve the media in the process of selling NEPAD and popularising it among ordinary citizens, and even professionals. Arguably, it has been treated in much the same way as the private sector by NEPAD's principals. There appears to have been an assumption that media organisations will realise they have a role to play in the initiative and they will automatically come on board. Such assumptions are

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no doubt based on the fact that the media was, initially, instrumental in putting NEPAD on the map and that this would continue with little effort from NEPAD principals themselves.

But, in four years, the fact that the media has not been brought into the initiative as a partner and stakeholder, but has rather been treated as a passenger, has led to waning enthusiasm about NEPAD. It gets relatively little mention in the African media outside events where it is thrust into the foreground, such as heads of state summits and African Union meetings. The result of this is what many consider another weakness of NEPAD – its overly strong focus on politics to the exclusion of discussion and information around development, delivery on programmes, projects, funding and other issues. These do surface sporadically, particularly ahead of G8 meetings, and then are covered primarily by the international, rather than the African, media.

Another aspect of the strong political emphasis is that, while information and comment is not readily available from the NEPAD Secretariat¹, the fact that speeches by heads of state and other government officials are, results in the focus of reporting being on political figures. There are several problems with this reporting bias. The first is that it strengthens the perception that NEPAD is a government, rather than a “people’s”, programme. It also reduces to some extent the credibility of the programme because political speeches tend to praise the initiative uncritically, without addressing issues of delivery on the high expectations raised during its early days. A third, related, problem is that the focus on heads of state creates perceptions of the initiative as being personality driven and non-inclusive. As a study done at Rhodes University’s School of Journalism and Media Studies points out, this could also potentially damage the long-term visibility of the initiative because when those personalities are out of the public spotlight, NEPAD may, by implication, become less visible.²

Government officials tend to “hide” behind the programme by making broad references in public speeches to Africa’s problems and what NEPAD is doing to solve them, making it seem like they are involved in activities to solve Africa’s problems. In fact, this simply allows them to avoid both the concerns of ordinary Africans, and particularly, governance and economic issues in their own countries.

For example, many official speeches focus on increasing market access in developed countries for Africa’s agricultural commodities. While this is obviously an important battle, and one in which NEPAD is active, nothing is mentioned about the fact that many countries already benefiting from agricultural preferences in developed countries are not able to fill their existing quotas because of problems located in their own economies and

¹ A survey of international editors and news editors of several South African newspapers revealed that press releases were not forthcoming from the Secretariat, press conferences were few and far between and information difficult to get from the Communications and Outreach Department and from members of other departments dealing with programmes of interest to the media such as infrastructure and projects.

² A Kanyegirire & L Ndangam, ‘African Media Coverage of NEPAD: Implications for African Journalism’, School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, September 2005.

governments, not because of market access issues. Improving intra-African trade is a mantra repeatedly made by heads of state despite the fact that they preside over governments with high tariffs on imports from their neighbours and which themselves are guilty of frustrating such trade through non-tariff barriers. In turn, much of the African media tends to focus on market access issues rather than looking at what can be done in their own back yards.

Beyond the speeches, African government officials are notorious for being suspicious of the media and not forthcoming in providing information. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that many African countries have restrictive anti-media laws, some have no independent media and in some countries media freedoms are being rapidly curtailed. Ironically, in countries where government propaganda rules the day, it may be that NEPAD gets better coverage, quantitatively anyway, given that government officials control information in such countries.

The NEPAD Secretariat, too, has been criticised for being difficult to get information from, and it has been described as, variously, defensive, bureaucratic and inaccessible when it comes to providing the media with information that is not covered in its newsletter. There is an emphasis on "political sensitivity" when it comes to giving out information. This is, presumably, premised on the strong government control of the process and the need to keep all players happy.

The Secretariat's media plan is limited and the organisation seems to have little knowledge of how the media works and, in turn, how to make it work for NEPAD. Media commentators believe that if the Secretariat had been more proactive in building relationships with the media and disseminating quality story information, there would have been much more coverage of NEPAD in the independent media. Part of the overall plan was for national offices to be the contact people but not all countries have such representatives, the ones that do are in some cases afflicted by the suspicion of the media as outlined above and there is also a tendency to refer people back to the Secretariat.

The selection of NEPAD news on its website (www.nepad.org) is fairly sparse and rather random. Given that the internet is the medium of choice for an increasing number of people in Africa and for people in developed countries, this website should be a more impressive "window" between NEPAD and the world at large. It certainly does not live up to this expectation currently.

Where the media has covered the story outside the realm of politics, it has tended to focus on lack of delivery. An unavoidable reality is that the media is event-driven, and reactive, rather than proactive. It wants real stories about concrete developments, not hot air (perhaps defined as an agreement, Memorandum of Understanding, or another conference where everyone agrees that NEPAD is a good thing etc.). e-Schools is a good example of an event that the media can latch onto - and has. The APRM processes in various countries are another.

Comments made by members of the Secretariat have conveyed an impression that they

believe the media is often reckless and irresponsible in its use of information and gets its facts wrong or does not cover the issues that the principals feel are important. There are several things that may contribute to this situation. The first is the fact that many African journalists are not professionally trained and in some cases, where commercial media is allowed to exist, operate in an environment where comment is often reported as fact, where sensationalism is part of selling newspapers and where politicians and political processes are considered fair game. Certain ethical considerations such as “off the record” conversations are sometimes violated.

One of the constraints of reporting NEPAD is the fact that many African newspapers and media organisations are staffed with people who do not have the experience, specialisation or interest to focus on issues such as agriculture, trade, sustainable development, environmental issues or science and technology and thus many of NEPAD’s achievements in this regard go unnoticed. An added problem is the fact that many people, including those in the media, do not really understand what NEPAD is beyond the broad strokes. A lack of understanding compromises their ability to cover it and interest in doing so. This, coupled with its extremely broad mandate, programmes and functions, does not help to make it user friendly for the media.

One only has to look at the kind of media coverage Senegal’s President Wade gets every time he criticises NEPAD or at how many column inches singer and activist Bob Geldof gets both overseas and in Africa to see that the media is hungry for more than routinely positive rhetoric on NEPAD. There is a desire for analysis, debate and critical reporting that is not being fulfilled. A lack of engagement with the media, the difficulty of getting information, the “tiredness” of many of the speeches about NEPAD and the lack of creative and innovative reporting by many media are among the reasons this is not happening.

Rather than criticising the media for such issues and making them reasons not to engage the media, NEPAD’s principals need to take these factors into account in their efforts with the media and work to address these problems and to counter them. Greater engagement with editors, allowing the media more access to relevant officials, identifying relevant people for journalists to contact for information, giving them the information they require to make sense of and understand NEPAD, keeping track of what the media is reporting and strategising on how to improve it or change the focus and drawing media experts into the net for advice are several ways to improve the relationship.

One issue that tends to undermine the ideals of NEPAD is the fact that there is little cross-border information flow. Africans know relatively little about each other and their countries, something that contributes to negative tendencies such as xenophobia but also to a very strong national focus on information. NEPAD should be doing more to build African information capacity, to find more ways to Africans to understand and talk to each other.

This raises another issue – the “ownership” of African news by African media and a

focus on building capacity to allow more pan-African coverage of events and issues by African journalists. Most of the analysis on NEPAD carried in African newspapers, for example, is either by foreign journalists packaged by foreign news agencies and organisations such as Reuters, Associated Press and the British Broadcasting Corporation, or by foreign analysts focusing on developments in Africa. While foreign coverage of NEPAD is important, given the emphasis placed on partnerships with the developed world, reduced coverage of Africa by foreign networks means less access to news by Africans on their own continent, and it raises the question of Africans reporting on Africa from an “African perspective”.

NEPAD has been positive in driving the African media to look at itself and the way it covers Africa. The whole notion of African recovery has prompted a stronger focus on more reporting on African issues and events by Africans, particularly when reporting on pan-African or cross-border issues. However, there is an inherent presumption in some quarters that African journalists reporting on African events and issues should be less critical and negative in their coverage than their much-criticised international counterparts because of an unstated obligation to support African initiatives.

As South African editor Mathatha Tsedu wrote recently: “Does a concern for the image of Africa imply suppression of news about Conakry, Swaziland and Zimbabwe? It cannot be. The commitment to a true reflection of Africa cannot mean sunshine journalism. It means vigorous interrogation of our leaders, reflecting the good and the bad, not just the good and not just the bad. Democratic societies delegate power to run their affairs to governments. They also delegate to media practitioners the responsibility to monitor the responsibility of good journalism.”³

It is important that the media finds a balance between supporting development and innovation in Africa in support of the NEPAD initiative while not compromising its watchdog role. The media is the primary means by which Africans, and the world at large, can be kept informed about NEPAD – its successes, weaknesses and its failures. In short, it has the ability to make NEPAD a success or a failure, broadly speaking, by affecting perceptions of whether it is a success or a failure. And perceptions can quickly become reality regardless of the facts. It is for this reason that NEPAD’s principals need to develop a relationship with the media to ensure the story of NEPAD and its programmes is not lost or misrepresented.

In NEPAD’s favour is the fact that the African media is generally well disposed to cover development issues and to focus on issues that are driven by notions such as African unity, doing things the African way and looking for new operating paradigms that exclude western-imposed frameworks. This is an opportunity for those driving NEPAD.

The NEPAD initiative also still benefits from the enthusiasm of Africans, including the media, for a new way for the continent. There is still hope that Africa as a continent can do better and realise its potential and that NEPAD will ensure this happens. As a result, the ongoing advertisement about NEPAD as an African solution for African problems is

³ Tsedu is editor of City Press newspaper.

still newsworthy and still makes the paper.

The APRM has put NEPAD back on the radar. This is an ideal time for the NEPAD Secretariat, country operations and other structures to develop a relationship with the media which would be more positive for the programme generally and which would allow greater trust, information flow and feedback on coverage of issues. A new window of opportunity has opened for NEPAD – it would be a shame not to seize it.