



MY VOICE
YOUR VOICE
OUR FREEDOM

EDITORIAL

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JOURNALISTS SAFETY

#LetsTakeAMoment

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Hello 2022!

Welcome back to iSPEAK! Hoping you're ready to join us for many new adventures in the year ahead.

But first, we look at the year that was. Africa lost one of its most beloved sons on December 26, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town and Nobel Peace Laureate Desmond Tutu. A special thank you to Zimbabwean graphic designer Chaz Maviyane-Davies for the use of this striking graphic which tells the story of our beloved Arch so succinctly – one of a lifetime committed to the struggle for peace and justice for all people. RIP Arch. Aluta continua!



ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU

1931–2021

2021 was a year marred with internal conflicts, rising and brutal suppression of dissenting voices, authoritarianism, military insurgencies, flailing economies, elections marred by internet shutdowns, restrictive legislation and rampant corruption. iSPEAK contributor Reyhana Masters reflects on how these events impacted directly or indirectly on media freedom, media sustainability, media development, diversity and undoubtedly on access to information and freedom of expression. She discusses this in more detail in this month's **iSPEAK podcast** with host Kelvin Chiringa.

Two writers with conflicting opinions delve into the world of beauty pageants. Vaishna Roy ponders why, amidst a global pandemic, beauty pageants are even a 'thing' anymore, one she asserts has caused enormous damage to the female psyche by idealised beauty myths. Jessica Uiras, on the other hand, is Namibia's reigning **Miss Charm** and endows pageants as a platform that empowers women to become the best versions of themselves. We'd love to hear your thoughts on the matter. Contact us on **info@ispeak.africa**.

The COVID-19 pandemic is touching every aspect of our communities, demonstrating the depths of isolation experienced by society's most disadvantaged people. At its best, persons living with disabilities had limited voice before the pandemic. Now, in many cases, the pandemic has silenced those voices, writes Victor Mabutho.

January 2022 marks three years since Ghanaian investigative journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale Divela was gunned down by two men near his home on January 16, 2019. To date no one has been charged with his murder. **#LetsTakeAMoment** to honour him and others who have paid the ultimate price for doing their work.

Our partner, the Zimbabwean chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA Zimbabwe) turns 25! Congratulations to the board of trustees, national governing council, members and staff of MISA Zimbabwe on 25 years of sterling work to advance a plural media environment to serve the needs of the public in the region. Read **[here](#)** a special publication in which MISA Zimbabwe reflects on 25 years of media law reforms.

Enjoy this and more in our January edition of iSPEAK.

Remember, the iSPEAK newsletter is free so please do share word of iSPEAK far and wide with others who may have an interest in reading the analyses provided here and who may wish to participate in our monthly event (see website). We are focused on providing the African context and narrative on freedom of expression issues and look forward to providing challenging views on current debates that inform or change the way you think.

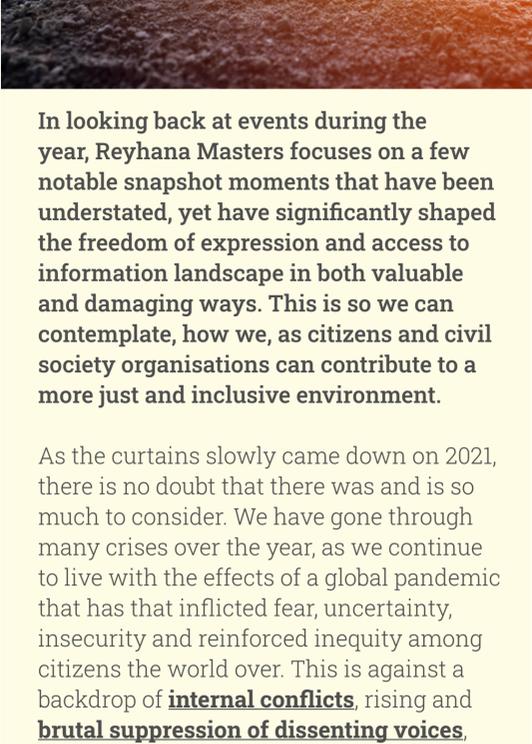
Make sure you don't miss out on our monthly edition by signing up on **[WhatsApp](#)** or joining the **[mailing list](#)**. Feel free to get in touch with us via email on info@ispeak.africa.

The iSPEAK team

My Voice | Your Voice | Our Freedom

Snapshots that shaped the FoE landscape in 2021

by *Reyhana Masters*



In looking back at events during the year, Reyhana Masters focuses on a few notable snapshot moments that have been understated, yet have significantly shaped the freedom of expression and access to information landscape in both valuable and damaging ways. This is so we can contemplate, how we, as citizens and civil society organisations can contribute to a more just and inclusive environment.

As the curtains slowly came down on 2021, there is no doubt that there was and is so much to consider. We have gone through many crises over the year, as we continue to live with the effects of a global pandemic that has that inflicted fear, uncertainty, insecurity and reinforced inequity among citizens the world over. This is against a backdrop of **internal conflicts**, rising and **brutal suppression of dissenting voices**, authoritarianism, military insurgencies, flailing economies, **elections marred by internet shutdowns**, restrictive legislation and rampant corruption. All of these factors have a direct as well as indirect link on media freedom, media sustainability, media development, diversity and undoubtedly on access to information and freedom of expression.

While it is necessary to focus on what beleaguers Africa, let's take a moment to focus on the brighter moments, of which there were quite a few.

What comes to mind instantly, is how World Press Freedom Day celebrations took a 360 degree spin, as explained by UNESCO, "to land right back in its birth place thirty years after the landmark meeting that brought forth the 1991 Windhoek Declaration on Free, Independent, and Pluralistic Press that ultimately initiated the 3 May proclamation."

While the impact of COVID-19 restrictions impacted on this year's WPFDD celebrations in terms of volume, it was nonetheless momentous when participants adopted the **Windhoek + 30 Declaration** – an updated version of Windhoek Declaration that takes into consideration the changes that have taken place over the past thirty years. This significant moment was further reinforced when member States at the 41st session of the UNESCO General Conference, unanimously voted in favour of **Namibia's resolution** to adopt the principles contained in the Windhoek +30 Declaration.

This endorsement has the potential to provide impetus to the issues contained in the Declaration and when combined with the content of the revised ACHPR Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, there is potential for the creation of a strong lobbying strategy and practical and effective advocacy interventions, to counter the deepening threats the continent and its' media are facing.

ATI win in The Gambia

Advocates were able to dust off the champagne glasses and raise the high, with The Gambia's **passage of the Access to Information Bill 2021** by the National Assembly on 1 July. This historic milestone, 5 years after emerging from a brutal dictatorship, is in large part due to the persistence of the Gambia Press Union and the ability of the various stakeholders – the civil society coalition and relevant ministries including the Ministry of Information and Communication and the Ministry of Justice being able to work collectively.

“What we can look to is to change our thought patterns word by word, consciously and consistently over time, and to persevere until results are seen in the way we do things and in the outcomes of our actions.”

Several months later, The Gambia was able to take another leap forward in its healing process as the country's Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission **submitted its final report** to President Adama Barrow based on hearings that started in January 2019.

Awards form the backstory to repression

While the nominations and granting of awards to courageous freedom of expression advocates – **Matias Guente**, **Samira Sabou**, and **Tsitsi Dangarembga** offered interludes for feelings of disquiet as they are bittersweet moments. At the same time that these awards recognise resilience and agency, they also expose the situation in which that resistance and courage is cultivated.

In his **acceptance speech** for the International Press Freedom Award by the Committee to Protect Journalists, **Mozambican journalist Guente**, by the Committee to Protect Journalists, put the spotlight squarely on the unsolved disappearance of **Ibraimo Mbaruco** adverse conditions in which the country's media have to operate within, **the commercial interests being protected** in the resource rich and restive region of Cabo Delgado and most notably his attempted kidnapping, the constant harassment he faces and the **costly arson attack** on his newspaper Canal de Moçambique.

On receiving the **German Peace Prize**, her **third award** this year, world acclaimed Zimbabwean novelist and filmmaker Dangarembga was praised for "the unique narrative with a universal view in her artistic work" and told: "you are not ordinary; an ordinary life was not an option for you. You are one of the most successful and important voices on the African continent . . ."

In her acceptance speech **Dangarembga analyzed**: "how physical, psychological, political, economic, metaphysical, and genocidal violence perpetrated within imperial structures has successively led to what she called a "no-win situation" in societies' current system."

"What we can look to is to change our thought patterns word by word, consciously and consistently over time, and to persevere until results are seen in the way we do things and in the outcomes of our actions. Our choices of thought content and process are ultimately a choice between violence-producing and peace-producing contents and narratives," she added.

The presentation of 2021 Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression Award in the journalism category to fearless campaigner, activist and blogger **Samira Sabou** highlights the risk investigative journalists are facing for exposing corruption. Despite being arrested and charged with defamation under the 2019 cybercrime law in connection with a **Facebook post** highlighting corruption, Sabou is fearless and continues pushing the boundaries to get at the truth.

Whistleblowers pay hefty price for speaking up

It's been a testing year for whistleblowers who have been purposely targeted for exposing malfeasance. Instead of being seen as heroes, they end up being persecuted.

This is certainly the case with Congolese bank staffers Gradi Koko and his colleague Navy Malela who were both **imposed with death sentences** in their home country in absentia for **exposing an alleged money laundering network** within the DRC. In addition to this unjust punitive measure, they have also become the targets of a smear campaign and have also received death threats.

But possibly the most tragic death was the targeted assassination of South African whistleblower Babita Deokaran. She was shot and killed outside her home in Winchester Hills on 23 August 2021. Deokaran was a senior financial officer at the Gauteng Department of Health and an important witness in an investigation of corruption within the department; former colleagues **believe** she was helping authorities link senior political figures to irregular procurement deals.

Journalist **Mandy Wiener's opinion piece**, two weeks after Deokaran's death pointed for the need "to change the way we in society respond to whistleblowers – not by treating them as outcasts, pariahs, impimpis, traitors or troublemakers, but as courageous, ethical, heroic citizens with integrity. We should all want to emulate them."

Journalists death toll continually rising

Possibly the most taxing issue for the media is the thriving culture of impunity in direct correlation to the rising number of murders of journalists on the continent.

Just before the world marked International Day to End Impunity, the continent had already witnessed the death of 10 African journalists and 3 foreign journalists as well as the **abduction of a French journalist** in the Sahel. Less than two weeks after November 2 commemorations, the death toll rose to 15 with the **targeted suicide bombing** that killed well-known journalist Abdiyaz Mohamad Guled and injured Sharmarke Mohamed Warsame, the director of the government-owned Somali National TV, and their driver Abdulkadir Abdullahi Nur. Meanwhile in Kenya, a murder investigation has been launched into the **death of Kate Mitchell**, a senior manager at BBC Media Action. Although many of the deaths may not be linked to their work, it remains an issue of concern.

As already pointed out in a previous **iSPEAK.Africa article**: Giving impetus to the boldness of these attacks, is the lack of political will in providing credible and coherent responses to these violations. The thriving culture of impunity is not only an indicator of how the media is being purposefully debilitated, but it also points to weak policing and justice systems."

Weaponisation of legislation and the rise in surveillance

While imposing arbitrary internet shutdowns has always been of major concern to digital rights activists, the most devious and disturbing threat is the number of African countries that have deployed surveillance devices in recent years. Research conducted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the African Digital Rights Network (ADRN), looked into how the governments of **Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa** and **Sudan** are using and investing in new digital technologies to carry out illegal surveillance on citizens.

African governments' are focusing their attention on increasing surveillance of any member of the public posing a threat to their entrenchment of power, namely - critics, activists, opposition party members and the media.

As **The Conversation** points out: "in the **first comparative review** of privacy protections across Africa, the evidence is clear: governments are purposefully using laws that lack clarity. Or they ignore laws completely in order to carry out illegal digital surveillance of their citizens. What's more, they are doing so with impunity."

The report found that existing surveillance laws are being eroded by six factors:

- the introduction of new laws that expand state surveillance powers;
- lack of legal precision and privacy safeguards in existing surveillance legislation;
- increased supply of new surveillance technologies that enable illegitimate surveillance;
- state agencies regularly conducting surveillance outside of what is permitted in law;
- impunity for those committing illegitimate acts of surveillance and
- insufficient capacity in civil society to hold the state fully accountable in law.

The three categories of surveillance technology being used by the six African governments are social media surveillance, signal intercept surveillance and mobile phone spyware. Remote-control hacking is another form of surveillance technology that is spreading across the continent. These surveillance systems enable governments to access files on targeted laptops. They also log keystrokes and passwords as a means to turn on webcams and microphones.

While these countries may be weak on data protection legislation, they tend to be heavy handed with cybersecurity or cybercrime laws that are then used to suppress free speech. An **analysis by the Media Foundation** for West Africa takes a close look at laws and frameworks passed in seven West African countries that constrict freedom of expression of online publications, and muzzle dissenting voices.

All these developments and events - good and bad - highlighted in this snapshot require our attention. How do we counter threats being posed. What can we do to build on the advocacy that is needed to curtail the erosion of our rights. How do we celebrate our heroes and heroines in a way that raises their profile while amplifying the conditions in which they operate? How can we raise attention and work on strategies to curb excesses by State authorities infringing on our rights.

Reyhana Masters is a passionate advocate for media freedom and freedom of expression. She uses her grounding in journalism to weave compelling stories to sketch the African context and challenge regressive narratives on freedom of expression and policy issues on the continent.

The burden of beauty

By Vaishna Roy

This year's Miss Universe is from India, but why are beauty pageants even a thing anymore?

As I watched the crowning moment of the Miss Universe 2021 pageant, I realised that I could not differentiate between Miss Paraguay and Miss India. As the camera panned from one face to the other as they held hands in a schoolgirl simulation of “sisterhood”, they could well have been twins for all I could tell. And that, in a nutshell, is what the event is today; or perhaps science has just made the “sameness” more pronounced. I faithfully watched segments of this utterly pointless annual exercise - and it was painful. Identical women, with identically sculpted faces and bodies, parading in identically ideated clothing that matches up to what the West has declared will constitute ‘evening wear’ or ‘beachwear’.

The event at best is the Hollywood princess cliché at its syrupiest, but in 2021 it seemed to serve up many more face-palm moments than ever before. There was the crowning irony moment when India's Harnaaz Sandhu, who became Miss Universe, passionately dissed beauty and declaimed, “Let's talk about more important things happening worldwide...” while blithely forgetting that she was participating in an event in Israel amidst boycott calls and global concerns about the country's ruthless settlement and suppression policy vis-à-vis Palestinians, an “important thing” that neither participants nor organisers were talking about.

In fact, some contestants posed with Palestinian costumes and food using a Visit Israel hashtag, oblivious to the blatant appropriation that allows Palestinian culture to be showcased even as Palestinians are systematically erased.



Image: Getty Images

“Know you are unique,” trilled Harnaaz, “and stop comparing yourself with others,” even as she fought her way to the Top 10 of an event that sets 80 women in a pitched battle to decide which one will be declared most beautiful. As the young women cat-walked in a style very remote from the human gait, several of them tripped in their impossibly high heels and on the trains of their de rigueur flowing gowns. They carried ridiculous props in the national costume round. They meowed like cats. They smiled relentlessly. As always, it was all rather silly and sad.

Many of the women's bios declared that they were working with children or young adults or women's rights issues - and yet none of them seemed to see anything wrong with an event that forces women to measure up to boxed standards of height, weight, proportions, teeth, nose in order to be declared “beautiful”; an event that unequivocally foregrounds and rewards women for their physical appearance.

The standard response to such criticism is that these women “choose” to participate and that it empowers them. In fact, when Nelson Mandela's grandson called for a boycott, Miss Universe Iraq went ballistic. “How dare you as a man try to tell an organisation for women and women empowerment what to do,” she said. She described the event as an “opportunity” for millions of women who dream of going on the world stage to represent their countries.

But to use words like “choice” and “empowerment” in the context of a massively marketed and financed event that is strategically backed by leading cosmetic and couture brands, and which exists inside a giant bubble of unbridled consumerism is farcical at best and tragic at worst. Touching faith in an entirely make-believe world makes it no more real than the winners posing with slum kids or domestic violence victims makes Miss Universe a human rights affair.

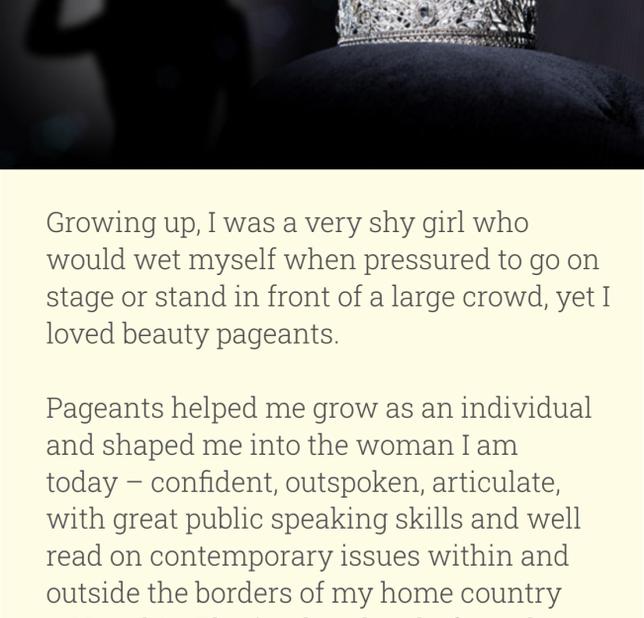
One imagined that something as cataclysmic as a global pandemic might have made us look at the world differently. To rethink fashion and beauty. To give women real rather than skin-deep power. But it's business as usual. Just as celebrities believe that wearing the same dress twice makes them eco warriors, Miss Universe rolls on, peddling itself as a women's empowerment mission while ignoring the enormous damage done to the female psyche by such idealised beauty myths.

At an even more basic level - what really does a beauty pageant mean in a world where the perfect nose is a scalpel away and flawless skin comes in a bottle? When an entire team works to create a Galatea-like vision of perfection, where does reality end and illusion begin? Ultimately, we are left “celebrating” as feminine beauty something that's little more than a perfect mannequin.

Vaishna Roy is an award-winning journalist and Associate Editor with The Hindu.

Aspire to Inspire – Beauty with a Purpose!

By Jessica Mundie Uiras



Growing up, I was a very shy girl who would wet myself when pressured to go on stage or stand in front of a large crowd, yet I loved beauty pageants.

Pageants helped me grow as an individual and shaped me into the woman I am today – confident, outspoken, articulate, with great public speaking skills and well read on contemporary issues within and outside the borders of my home country – Namibia. That's what the platform does - it empowers women to become the best versions of themselves.

Beauty pageants allowed me to dream. I wanted to be a Princess Diana or a Sofia I, but when I got to understand everything a lot better, I saw that it was an opportunity to grow as an individual - a platform of empowerment. But what really attracted me is that every pageant has an opening statement and Q and A round and that is what first caught my attention.

I was part of the Spelling Bee competition for three consecutive years. I loved anything and everything competitive and so the Q and A segment was my adrenalin. I also love how women embrace themselves and how beautiful they are. Back then I thought only pageant queens could wear heels, make up and glamorous dresses.

I wasn't confident enough to enter a pageant until I turned 18, and that was after watching literally every pageant I ever had access to. My hunger to be on stage grew immensely with every competition I viewed. When I finally became an entrant, I was sure that I was born to be a model. I fell in love with the thinking behind pageant mandates and what they strive for – that is because I really feel they align with my character as an individual.

Before going into beauty pageants on a more regular basis I had tried lots of different things to boost my confidence.

I tried almost every extra-curricular activity I could think of - debate group, choir, chess club and more. It turned out that I was the best netball player in Khomas region by the age of 11, and as my skills grew, I was chosen to play for the Afro Cats premier team in the Khomas Netball League at 17. I was thriving! I was at my peak - juggling between netball, pageants and pursuing my degree. Then I had a sport- related knee injury that left me on crutches for six months. It was at that time that I had to choose between the two things I loved most. I could focus on continuing with netball or go full time into beauty pageants.

Naturally beauty pageants won because of that love affair that started when I was 8 years old.

Today I am an international beauty pageant queen with over five years' experience in the industry.

I was very sad and upset when I saw this [article](#), because pageantry isn't all about glitz and glam, and just “parading about on stage”. It's an actual job.

When you become queen, you have responsibilities. The moment you join a pageant you are required to be informed about and have access to contemporary issues that affect today's society. Pageantry is an education in disguise.

We build bonds, we become sisters and we learn from each other. It's not just a group of 80 women competing for a crown, it's a group of women who want to make a difference in their societies.

Pageantry empowered me and gave me courage to take up space and cement myself in society. The most important thing pageants have taught me is to be a leader. This is something 8-year-old Jessica was lacking, not because I didn't want to take up the reigns of leadership, but because of how society boxes women to believe they can't

Today I am not afraid to stand in front of a crowd and advocate for what's right.

Pageantry empowered me and gave me courage to take up space and cement myself in society. The most important thing pageants have taught me is to be a leader. This is something 8-year-old Jessica was lacking, not because I didn't want to take up the reigns of leadership, but because of how society boxes women to believe they can't.

No longer are we solely focused on beauty. If you dive deep and witness the process of how it is done, and how every queen prepares for a particular pageant, it's a lot more than just looking beautiful and “parading the stage.” It's about how you believe in yourself, how you feel about yourself and the opinions that you carry. It's about your WHY and the difference you want to make in your community with the advocacy you bring forth to the Miss Universe (MU) platform. It's about your personality and the way you carry your ideology.

We in the pageant industry are being subjected to unfair prejudice because of the perception people have about the industry and the beauty standards that have long faded. Every pageant has a mandate - Miss Supranational Namibia talks about inspirational and aspirational women, whereas Miss Charm advocates for education, culture and tourism.

Most of all, we are a very inclusive industry because we have evolved over the years.

We are breaking through the stereotypes, people from the LGBTQI+ community who identify as women can now take part in pageants. Today, we are strong, empowered women trying to achieve a childhood dream with a different approach as we erase the stereotypes. I am a leading example, as a Bachelor of Communication graduate and full-time employee at the Namibia Media Trust, where we advocate for freedom of expression, access to information and professional media standards.

I will continue echoing my truth by insisting that we [beauty pageant contestants] have a purpose. We are role models to young girls and we advocate for the empowerment of women.

I am an ambassador for change that carries my project, #HearUs campaign, where I help the hearing and visually impaired community develop themselves to their fullest potential. I raise that Namibian flag high at every pageant I compete in with pride, just like any other beauty pageant queen.

We (beauty pageant contestants) contribute to the GDP of our countries as we promote the culture, heritage and tourist attractions during our introduction videos, bio's and most importantly when we “parade the stage” in our national costume.

Our lives don't revolve around pageantry. We are so much more: we are lawyers, doctors, journalists, engineers etc. Women are multi-faceted. We are not all the same and we shouldn't be boxed into a corner because of what we choose to do or how we choose to do it. We are ambitious, intelligent women from all walks of life with a passion for pageantry.

Pageant stereotypes continue to exist and are transmitted through media, and through social, educational and recreational socialisation, which promotes pageant prejudice and discrimination. I argue that watching one show, and studying pageants overnight, does not critically engage the purpose of beauty pageants, which could help in developing affirmative action-oriented perspectives.

I believe the narrative of an international pageant (or any other pageant) is to create a global connection between countries across the world. I hope to shadow whatever misconceptions and stereotypes people have on beauty pageants. We can knock on doors and we can get them to open, especially those male-dominated spaces.

Pageant queens have a great impact on change in today's society.

The calibre of women that start campaigns such as the #HeforShe campaign - which advocates against gender-based violence (GBV) – along many other brilliant advocacies that give society hope, are taken up by the United Nations to help these queens make a difference.

One thing about pageantry is that it exposes every contestant to the platforms they can use to make a difference. Not winning the title or the crown doesn't take away from achieving their goal to make a difference in society. The platform elevates the ability of these women to stand strong and continue their fight to make the world a better place.

Jessica Mundie Uiras holds a Bachelor's degree in Communications and Media. She is a full-time employee at the Namibia Media Trust where she advocates for freedom of expression, access to information and journalism excellence. Jessica is also a passionate international beauty pageant model and the co-founder of 'Born 2 Model'. She recently launched project #HearUs, where she helps the hearing & visual impaired develop their full potential.

The invisibility of disability

By Victor Mabutho

How persons with disabilities (PWDs) are covered by the media, points to a disturbing reality of how handicapped the media is in understanding their daily lives. The media has a blurry vision of the plight of PWDs, and are not listening to their concerns and needs. In looking at the how the media frames the PWD discourse, Victor Mabutho shares his eye opening experience sparked by a webinar on persons with disabilities.

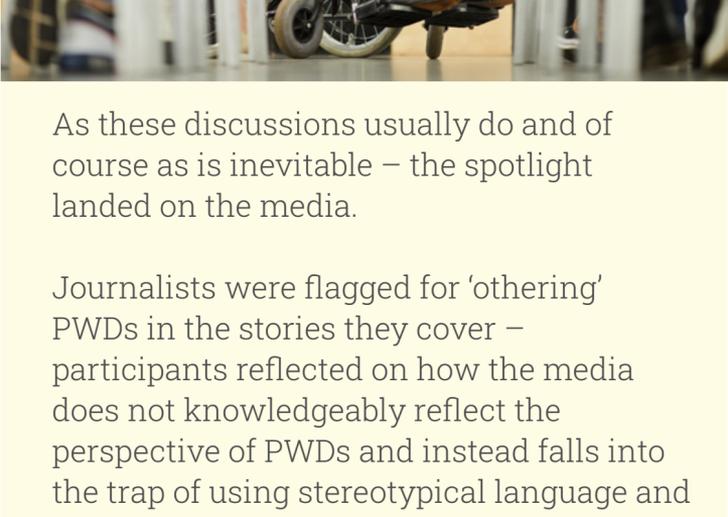
Listening to presentations by expert panelists during a webinar convened by Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) on how the media can promote the rights of persons with disabilities – I learnt so much.

I also realized that I had no idea about what was happening in the realm of PWD rights. My initial engagement with the webinar was a little selfish really – I was planning on picking up a story idea. But it did more than that. It made me understand how the media reinforces stereotypes because it really is deaf and blind to how we can improve our reporting of the issues that speak to the interests and concerns of PWDs.

Listening through the presentations literally and figuratively opened my eyes – to the little things that PWDs would like to see changing and the big things that need our spotlight. I was not prepared for the understanding that would come through.

It was my first time hearing about the United Nation’s **Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (CPRD) and it’s significant because it was adopted way back in 2006 and yet even the one critical intent: *“to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity”* falls far short of self-actualisation.

I learnt, without being surprised, that the African Union had its own regional instrument - the **Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa** which has the same purpose as the CPRD. What is horrifying and worrying, is that it has yet to come into force as ONLY 9 countries out of 54 African nations have ratified it.



As these discussions usually do and of course as is inevitable – the spotlight landed on the media.

Journalists were flagged for ‘othering’ PWDs in the stories they cover – participants reflected on how the media does not knowledgeably reflect the perspective of PWDs and instead falls into the trap of using stereotypical language and relying on assumptions.

“The media will focus on a person with a disability as having done something extraordinary and report it as a novel achievement or undertaking, yet the person is actually doing something that is normal and part of their everyday routine. We think we are doing stories that show ‘their plight’ or the challenges they face - which can be a good thing. But it’s how we frame that narrative that matters,” explained Richard Mativu from Sense International, Kenya during the webinar.

Participants mentioned that celebrating the media for using local languages is a given, but when journalists report on PWDs or host and anchors talking about them, the traditional terms that continue being used are often offensive and demeaning.

In sharing his thoughts on why the media covers PWDs the way they do, Ugandan lecturer, Dr Abdul Busuulwa, highlighted the underlying problem. “The newsroom is closed to us. That is where the tragedy starts. We need to be included. “If newsrooms and platforms were open to us in terms of employment or even consulted us on certain stories, there would have been a higher chance we would be woven into the DNA of their stories, but they don’t, which is why the ‘we and them’ situation continues.”

“I studied mass communications, but was never able to work in a newsroom. I applied to many radio stations and newspapers, but none was able to give a satisfactory answer as to why they didn’t hire me even though I attained several degrees and was taught by expert lecturers. I only worked as a freelancer for a short time,” he adds.

Beyond this insightful meeting, I spoke to renowned cricket commentator and broadcaster, Zimbabwean Dean du Plessis who explains how the focus of an article takes away from the heart of the issue. “I don’t want to be featured or recognised as the world’s first blind cricket commentator. That means nothing to me.” For du Plessis – the focus on his blindness overshadows that of his talent and so that is an impediment in itself. “I want to be recognized for the quality of my work as a journalist,” he explains.

“There has to be a very big shift in people’s belief. Broadcasters have to overcome this fear of employing disabled people. You can hammer on the door all you like churning out the most amazing podcasts or articles, but if they don’t believe in us, if they continue to be afraid, we will not see that change in my generation.”

These insights made me ask myself: If we as the media are unable to get beyond these limitations, how can we really write so that there is change.

Did we think about how we put out information on COVID-19? Did the media contemplate how we need to make this information accessible to PWDs.

As Agness Chindimba who works for Deaf Women Included in Zimbabwe points out: “COVID impacted the way we work and operate especially when delivering information around gender-based violence and sexual reproductive health rights to women and girls with disabilities. Access to information about COVID-19, in the early days of the pandemic was very difficult, as there was no interpreting of information into accessible format like sign language, large print and braille”.

When I think about all this, I realise that in the context of COVID-19, what is already complex situation for PWDs actually threatens to push them off the edge.

From not being heard to not being seen at all - that is the dilemma persons with disabilities are currently facing.

The media has to step up to its role of shaping opinions and attitudes on disability. It has to take a keen and active interest in PWD rights, going the extra mile to inspire acceptance and accommodate differently abled people. As an individual I really do need to change my perspective about PWDs, because they are human first and they deserve our respect if they are to keep their dignity.

Victor Mabutho is a freelance journalist and social media consultant based in Harare, Zimbabwe. He has a keen interest in Africa and has researched and published on a broad spectrum of issues affecting the continent, including politics, freedom of expression, elections and tech. He can be found on Twitter at @Victor_Mabutho



NEW EPISODE!

with Reyhana Masters

**LOOKING BACK AT THE
YEAR 2021**



~~NO~~
IMPUNITY

Remembering the fallen



Ahmed Hussein-Suale Divela
Investigative journalist

Tiger Eye Private Investigations
Ghana, Accra

Age: 31

Cause of Death: Gunshot

Date: January 16, 2019

Status: Unresolved

#LetsTakeAMoment to remember Investigative journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale Divela who was gunned down by two men in Accra, Ghana, near his home on January 16, 2019. Divela had been working with popular Ghanaian investigative reporter Anas Aremeyaw Anas. Months before Divela's murder, a Ghanaian parliamentarian Kennedy Agyapong exposed the identity of Divela on national television, calling on the public to beat him up over his investigative reporting.

Agyapong has publicly attacked several journalists. He was reported to Parliament's Privileges Committee by a fellow parliamentarian. Prominent editor and publisher Abdul Malik Kweku Baako filed and won a defamation suit against him. Divela's murder remains unresolved.