



ИНТЕРВЬЮ НОМЕРА INTERVIEW

DOI: 10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-2-367-371

EDN: SFXXYFM

UDC 070

Africa and media paradigms – the view of an African expert from Russia: interview with Zenebe T. Kinfu

Article history: submitted January 8, 2024; revised January 26, 2024; accepted March 31, 2024.

For citation: Kinfu, Z.T. (2024). Africa and media paradigms – the view of an African expert from Russia (Irina I. Volkova, personal communication). *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 29(2), 367–371. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-2-367-371>

Африка и медийные парадигмы – взгляд африканского эксперта из России: интервью с З.Т. Кинфу

История статьи: поступила в редакцию 8 января 2024 г.; отрецензирована 26 января 2024 г.; принята к публикации 31 марта 2024 г.

Для цитирования: *Kinfu Z.T.* Africa and media paradigms – the view of an African expert from Russia / personal communication by Irina I. Volkova // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2024. Т. 29. № 2. С. 367–371. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-2-367-371>

Doctor of Philosophy Professor Kinfu is among the most famous specialists in the media systems of Africa, one of the founders and publisher of the international magazine “Business Africa”, President of the Association “Union of African Diasporas in Russia”, member of the expert council of the State Duma the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, in the Committee for the Development and Support of Comprehensive partnerships with African countries, non-staff advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia and the Embassy of the Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in the Russian Federation. We asked Mr. Kinfu, a graduate of

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RUDN University, where he a former taught with his supervisor, the legendary international journalist Professor Yakov Lomko, to answer our questions on current issues of the Russian-African agenda and share his views on today's journalism.

– Could you tell our readers about the mediatization in Africa? Is it different from mediatization elsewhere? How digital is Africa now?

The concept of mediatization is absolutely same throughout the changing world. In practical terms, all sectors, ranging from politics through business and economy to culture, and their levels of development in the African society are largely influence by the mass media. There is no way for businesses to perform without using forms of media available, to promote products and services. In political sphere, we cannot over-estimate the role media plays in informing the electorate, the political parties and their aspirations. Africa is fast developing and the youth are media-savvy, the use of internet has become very fashionable but the only obstacle encountered in the process is the limited resources. Many African countries are seriously experiencing energy crisis, and this places limitation on the process of mediatization. It is a fact that the mediatization and digitalization in Africa are currently facing the challenges developed countries have left behind, i.e., poor infrastructure, lack of financial support, and technological gap between urban and rural areas, not to mention language and cultural barriers. However, African governments realize that mediatization and digitalization possess enormous developmental potential, which gradually makes them top priorities on the African agenda.

– In this respect, is there a pan-African media system? Or is it a sum of national media systems? Do language communities affect mediatization?

With mediatization and other modern forms of accessing information are facilitated irrespective of location. Readers who live in Pretoria, South Africa can access and read about Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya. The prefix "pan" has little meaning this modern times. More than half a century ago, Kwame Nkrumah (Ghanian), Julius Nyerere (Tanzanian) and their colleagues, during the struggle to attain independence, created Pan-African News Agency (PANA). Today that news agency still exists somehow, but the editor lives in the United States and still manages this Pan African News Wire. But many more news information media have become popular, more popular than the pan-African News Wire. In addition to this, the latest Africa.com could be considered pan-African media whose South African-operators live in the United States.

Today there is no difficulty to find Swahili and/or Hausa or Amharic news-information channels. They facilitate for local listeners to learn and know about diverse developments in the west – in Washington, London and Paris.

In another way Africa has problems for example with the Internet connection, mean number of internet users in selected countries 2024¹.

As of January 2024, Nigeria had more than 103 million internet users – the highest number reported all over Africa. Meanwhile, Egypt is ranked second

¹ Published by Saifaddin Galal, March 13, 2024. Retrieved March 20, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/505883/number-of-internet-users-in-african-countries>

with over 82 million users. The majority of web traffic in leading digital markets in Africa originated from mobile devices – in Nigeria, one of the countries with the largest number of internet users worldwide, 86.2 percent of web traffic was generated via smartphones and roughly 13.3 percent via PC devices. This is due in part to the fact that mobile connections are much cheaper and do not require the infrastructure that is needed for traditional desktop PCs with fixed-line internet connections.

The projected trend for Africa indicates a consistent rise in internet users from 2024 to 2029. It will have a collective addition of 337.3 million users (equivalent to a growth of 51.79 percent). Following fifteen successive years of growth, the user count is anticipated to reach a record high of 1.1 billion by 2029.

The region has witnessed a steady increase in internet users over the years. In January 2024, Southern Africa stood out as the African region with the most substantial internet penetration rate, reaching approximately 73.1 percent. The proportion of individuals accessing the internet in this part of Africa and Northern Africa surpassed the global average (66.2 percent). Moreover, Morocco boasted an impressive internet penetration of about 91 percent, securing its position as Africa's foremost country. Libya held the second position with a penetration rate of approximately 88 percent, followed closely by Seychelles at around 86.7 percent.

– How politicized are African media? Is their role in conflicts constructive or destructive?

In Africa and elsewhere around the world, politics and media are inseparable. The Government owns media for its primary aim of promoting political propaganda. Media are currently supported by state budget. For example, BBC is funded by a specified approved budget, so also media owned by the government in Africa. In our time also is not secret that what Carlson Tucker TV channel is clandestinely financed and supported by the Russian government. A number of private media are granted funds for good and useful performance. This does not mean the media cannot spread disinformation, or make false narratives, or promote coordinated misinformation resulting in exacerbating tensions across communities. Whether constructive or destructive, both depends much on the situation in a particular country, also some media are destructive as they aggravate political conflicts, promote hatred, and encourage aggression. However, independent media can be quite consolidating: they introduce public problems, expose corruption, and shape progressive public opinions.

I think, today Global African culture is maintained by the media. businesses record high performance through media adverts. And politicians sustain their high prestigious positions as media talks about their good performance and highlight their successful projects to the citizens. The presidency, the cabinet and the parliament are connected to the media. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa travels with media to BRICS. In the same way, Kenyan President William Ruto is promoted to be the next African Union Commission chairperson through the media. Whether local, national, regional or foreign travels, the media plays an important pragmatic role by informing the elites and the public about the results of high-level meetings, therefore politically-engaged.

– Do African media facilitate democratic processes on the continent?

We understand that, in reality the processes of democracy and its ethical values are guided by the legislations, enacted by parliament. Throughout history, media does not have to facilitate these processes, but rather inform and explain to the public how the democratic processes are developing. Of course, the influence of media outlets could help change aspects of democracy based on a systematic campaign either for or against certain aspects of the democratic process. Any change has to be discussed and approved by parliament, as the legislators are the people's representatives. But people believe that Democracy protects the media from censorship, government pressure, and private interests. Democratic legislation ensures freedom of speech and information. As a result, the media gain access to a variety of sources. If the media are not forced to broadcast particular facts or opinions, they eventually teach their readers the art of critical thinking.

I don't agree or believe that the media and democratic processes all time are interconnected since democratic media they didn't all-time promote freedom of information and encourage citizens to participate in political life, which is an important aspect of democracy.

– New digital media technologies – are they a blessing for Africa or a disinformation tool?

Unsurprisingly in many African countries, modern forms of digital technologies have indeed appeared. Now it is possible to run e-voting ballot system, which is more comfortable and more convenient for people. To a large degree, it helps societies to maintain transparency. Digital technologies, undoubtedly have merits and demerits, advantages and disadvantages. But this again depends on system administrators to demonstrate technical precision and correctness in its applications. It is incorrect to deal with the complexities and how modern technologies threaten development of society across Africa.

– As a media scientist, which research paradigms do you see as especially relevant in African political conflict resolution and media studies?

As a media professional I have been working for more than 40 years but as a media researcher – since my graduating in 1994 from Peoples Friendship University of Russia (today again named after Patrice Lumumba), I would suggest it is imperative to remain tactfully informed and be unwaveringly vigilant to every aspect of the political conflict as it develops. With regards to the research paradigms, it will be inappropriate to look at the theoretical paradigms. I think it is necessary to study and identify the practical root-causes and the trends so as to determine resolution of the conflict. Here there should be an emphasis on a coherent critical approach related to the causes of the conflict. Media can be used to communicate, if necessary, and transform the conflict platform into resolution platform. In most cases, conflicts continue primarily due to ambiguities, confusion and lack of adequate information, which is why the role of the media is necessary as well as the role of an individual journalist.

– As for African scholars, which media systems and media problems do they find prospective? What do they think of collaborations between African and Russian research teams?

A combination of both African and Russian researchers to form teams could be preferable. This kind of collaboration gives multidimensional perspectives to the problem at stake. The evolving hybrid media system can be useful to argument traditional ones. Arguably hybrid is increasingly used for interactive discussions among academics as it saves time and more convenient these days. Collaborative research is by nature more motivational, and therefore strongly recommended.

– What are your plans as a media researcher and publisher?

As always to be a media practitioner, a researcher, a publisher and an academic professor or a Social worker/activist. It is rewarding to work with people and be part of the society. My plan is to make information about Russia's peoples, cultural life, economic and investment perspectives available to African readers. My publications as an expert' explain the processes that are currently taking place in regional countries and provide our readers with a profound understanding of Russian-African reality. We help our Russian audience recognize the best investment and relationship conditions by revealing the advantages and risks for each African country. We are happy to provide our mission to be the bridge between Russia and Africa.

Interviewed by Irina I. Volkova / Интервью провела И.И. Волкова

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