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During my several travels around the world, no memory has remained as deeply engraved in my mind as the expressions of incredulity in the developed world countries I visited, whenever I showed excitement on the eve of my return home to Africa. To these well meaning people, some of them would be my hosts, the return to Africa for an African represents my reconciliation with poverty, hunger, disease and death. Many would actually express that they thought my clothes were bought in their countries and that the façade of my physical well being had been enhanced by their local food. These nice people, God-fearing and non-racist people, would have watched their cable television networks and viewed an African story that would invariably feature a continent of conflict, self-inflicted suffering, cannibalism, rampant corruption, misery and death. Many a time they would have already referred to me as "different" and asked me with disbelief how I came to speak the English language so well. I haven't mastered my French yet but I'm getting there and I know questions await me. How then can this so called different African be excited about returning to purgatory? Some have actually politely accused me of putting on an act to minimise the daunting prospects of returning to the hell on earth called Africa.

All these people are products of, victims of, and faithful believers of the power of the New Media to bring the truth-nothing else but the truth-to their living rooms. What a wonderful world, this Digital Age!

There, in front of them, and with digital excellence, their television sets and the silky voice of their African correspondent loaded with an amazing repertoire of vaccinations in the blood, would have told them an African story. At times the child in me overcomes my old age and silently asks me a bemused question: if they think there is no life in Africa, how come they believe there is death? Even going back decades, one asks : these Africans have been dying in such multitudes how in the world do we still have millions of them?

The real questions to be asked by a mature, well informed and a fair judge of information and communication processes would be: Is that an African story? Just because your TV set has shown Africa and the Africans, does it make it an African story? Has the African story been told? The other question is : who is telling the story?

A true African story would and should not be in denial. We are dying of poverty, hunger, disease and conflict ; but the African story would carry some explanations or give some insight into the illogical scenarios of armed gangs with sophisticated weapons in regions where you cannot even get an aspirin. An African story would put into perspective the fact that not all of Africa in conflict is conflict-diamond sponsored ; and would ask: how in the world do these New Age weapons of destruction leave the efficient contours and shores of the developed world? Who are the real sponsors?

An African story would reveal how self-proclaimed environmentalists with more money than information run endless campaigns designed to perpetuate ignorance in Africa and convert people into wild life species for the tourist pleasures of the developed world ; and also for the pseudo-environmentalist, just to prove that Africa is wild and has to stay wild. Yet, with most of our real wildlife species still in tact we represent the best conservationists in the world. An African story would question where the abundant wildlife species of the developed world has gone to...rare bird species shot for spot and target practice ; buffalo decimated ; forests razed down. Who is the expert here on conversation?

An African story would reveal how in 1994 when Nelson Mandela exchanged hats with F.W. de Klerk in an atmosphere of peace, security , tranquillity and amazing decorum, western journalists packed their bags, unplugged their New Age media technology and publicly complained that the Pretoria ceremony was a non-story ; and that they were heading for the Great Lakes Region where once again, Africans were killing each other. The inauguration of President Nelson Mandela had been speculated to be an event fraught with danger

and almost certain violence. The Developed World media was disappointed at what they felt was an unreal African story .

The full story, the real story; the comprehensive story about Africa and the Africans can best be told through concerted efforts to develop local content and ensure that it is disseminated in the broadest manner possible. In Africa, traditional broadcasting remains the most potent tool for the dissemination of information, communication and education. The advent of new technologies has not, however, been used to strengthen the supply of local content. I say the supply because local content does not exist but it is predominantly a raw material that requires refinement and subsequent dissemination.

Several philanthropic organizations, individuals and countries of the developed world have rushed to Africa's side and assisted in a number of ways. They have relentlessly been engaged in antipoverty schemes and campaigns against diseases including the current pandemic HIV/AIDS. We are eternally grateful. But problem solving methods, mechanisms and solutions arising there from are not interacted even though the problems are virtually identical. The successes of one region are inefficiently shared around the continent resulting in recidivism of problems.

My organization wishes to enter the sphere of broadcasting and collaborate with others towards the strengthening of interactive broadcasting in Africa. Simply put, we wish to enhance local content development and content-sharing either through simultaneous transmissions or delayed broadcasts. Information is a cure for many ills in our society and just like the successful medication, the information distribution system of Africa should be improved, strengthened and modernised in order to spread messages cost-effectively and efficiently. That would have the impact of sustaining the strenght of our supporters and enhancing our chances to be active part of the global village.

I am informed that at present, the programmes of public radio and television organizations of 30 African countries are broadcast on and over 20 satellites. This dispersion does not favour viewer ship or listener ship. There is clearly no interaction and lessons learned from success stories from other parts of the continent.

My organisation consists of 48 member organizations, almost all of them being public service organizations funded by their respective governments. Some are beginning to emerge from the handout syndrome by using their airtime to raise revenue and sustain their own programmes. But it is a steep road.

Local content needs both development and transmission, we have said. The view that information or content must be shared around the continent is in consonance with the aspirations of the political leaders of African countries to unite Africa under the African Union-formerly the Organization of African Unity. No matter how much conviction is gained in the corridors, halls and suites of Summit venues, if the ordinary African does not understand how unity, free movement and sharing of resources can help her or him, political leaders cannot attain their noble goals. The African media offers its services not only to the African Union to which we virtually belong anyway, but to the rest of the world that is frenetically engaged in efforts to attain the globalization of information and reach new dimensions of developing our societies. Africans, just like other people, can only unite and hence scale down conflict, enhance conflict prevention and conflict resolution if they are facilitated with the information to know themselves. For more than ten years now, our organization's main objective, though expressed and not implemented, has been the acquisition of satellite capacity in order to network Africa. We believe that conditions have never been more favourable than today to gain space capacity that meets the requirements needed by our broadcasters and the market as a whole. Technology, today, permits interactive broadcasting with small investments.

Just an example, we have heard of the VSAT Network and I am not doing a commercial for them. They are a necessary reference. This communication system that allows several sites to make telephonic and exchange data can be an excellent means for connecting the URTNA Secretariat Headquarters in Dakar, Senegal, with its Centres in Bamako, Mali, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, Algiers, Algeria and Nairobi, Kenya.

I am informed that when associated with the Digital Video Broadcasting-R eturn Channel over Satellite (DV B - R CS), the Communication system I have alluded to can enable the distribution of radio and television programmes of member organizations of URTNA; that would be, between our country organizations on the

one hand and on the other hand, provide access to Internet at high efficiency levels with useful applications such as telephonic and video conferences.

With cooperation, and combined with the fact that technology has become relatively more affordable for modest users such as our members in Africa, we can begin the process of circulating content within our countries and around the continent. I also learn that the advent of a new satellite, co-positioned with the one used by the European Broadcasting Union, the EBU, may offer a dual gateway between Africa and Europe. Our partners, supporters, sister unions and all those committed to the concept of the globalisation of information may wish to stand ready to facilitate the utilisation of these opportunities.

The late President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania has been quoted as having said : "When some are striving to join the moon, we are striving to reach our villages".

This statement cries out for a comprehensive understanding of the concept of globalisation during this age of the New Media or the Digital Age. If it is to be global, Africa must be there with genuine local content.

Disparities in life, in development, in technology mean disparities in advancement of communication means and ways. The advent of the New Media-the digital world, comes with fears of a creation of the digital gap that bears in itself the dangers of isolating vast numbers of people, particularly in Africa. I am glad that this fear has been recognised and is being dealt with through measures towards digital solidarity ; but I am equally perturbed that in spite of the laudable efforts of supportive organizations such as UNESCO, in attempts to stimulate the production and development of local content, the situation remains complex since the advent of the New Media does not show any unique endeavours to encourage the creation of local content, particularly in digital formats.

Development of local content does not only correct distortions created among our peoples and the rest of the world about Africa in particular, but the fact is that local content can be a development tool allowing people to have greater ability to improve their levels of life, reduce or overcome poverty, reduce the impact of disasters, build a fortitude to fight diseases and pandemics and create a new crop of visionary leaders that are committed to democracy and freedom of expression. Traditional broadcasters in Africa are already making inroads into the transformation of the perspectives of their own political leaders by using communication skills to change the thinking of politicians who view the media as a threat, a negative challenge, a nuisance, or simply an unsettling factor.

In conclusion, I wish to categorically state that URNTA represents the bulk of African broadcasters and is legitimately the voice of the people of Africa. Our members run the public service broadcasting organizations on behalf of the people of Africa. With credibility building in our media organizations side by side with increasing trends towards democracy and free flow of information, viewers and listeners in Africa act and react in their daily lives on the basis of information provided by our organizations. I wish to stress, however, that for our sake as a continent, for the sake of our supporters, and in the interest of bona fide globalisation of information, the acquisition of satellite capacity for the Union of African Broadcasters would open a new chapter of interactive broadcasting, unity among Africans, and provide a local content data base for the rest of the world media. Acquisition of satellite capacity is an investment project that has the immense potential to raise revenue and be therefore sustaining. The African Network would spring from this project and for once in the history of the continent, we would start to hear the African Story. We are ready to discuss with all interested parties.