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Emerging from Roots to Reach: Reimagining Africa's Newsroom

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CHAPTER 14

Emerging from Roots to Reach: Reimagining Africa's Newsroom

Dapo OLORUNYOMI

Central to this topic is the profound concept of "future-proofing." This is not just a buzzword; it embodies a strategic imperative for long-term survival and relevance in an unpredictable world. In essence, we are talking of designing things in such a way that they remain functional, relevant, and effective in the face of anticipated changes or challenges. In our specific context, it represents anticipating potential disruptions from technology, fluctuating market demands, new regulatory frameworks, shifting social trends, environmental pressures, or

even unforeseen crises. It compels us to build in resilience and adaptability from the very outset. For journalism, therefore, this means creating newsrooms, business models, and content strategies that are inherently flexible, robust enough to withstand shocks, and capable of evolving without necessitating a complete overhaul at every turn.

Since the goal of fostering financial independence and sustainability for independent media in Nigeria underpins every discussion today, let us begin with the acceptance that a media landscape heavily reliant on donor funding or susceptible to political influence cannot truly fulfill its crucial role as the Fourth Estate. It is imperative to explore innovative business models, from diverse digital subscriptions to niche content creation, from data-driven advertising to community funding, with the aim of equipping Nigerian newsrooms with the tools and strategies to stand on their own economic feet. This independence is the bedrock of credible, fearless journalism, enabling media to hold power accountable without fear or favour.

Africa's Digital Moment

By last year's count, Africa was on the verge of a digital revolution, with an anticipated 700 million internet users, promising significant transformations across economies, governance, and civil society. Yet, for the continent's media, this digital surge stands in stark contrast to a challenging reality: shrinking newsroom budgets, declining advertising revenues, and increasing threats to press freedom. As audiences rapidly migrate online, many media organisations struggle to monetise their digital reach, caught between the disruptive forces of technology and the persistent grip of traditional business models.

This paradoxical digital expansion amidst financial contraction forms the core of Africa's media sustainability crisis. In Nigeria, for instance, newsrooms are facing layoffs and closures even as social

media consumption skyrockets. Across the continent, platforms like WhatsApp and TikTok dominate information dissemination, but their algorithms often prioritise viral content over thoughtful journalism, such as investigative and solutions-oriented reporting, leading to an erosion of trust and a fragmentation of public discourse. Simultaneously, journalists contend with political intimidation, opaque technology policies, and the fundamental question of how media organisations can survive and truly thrive in such a volatile environment.

The answer lies in sprightliness: the capacity to adapt revenue streams, effectively leverage technology, and deepen audience engagement without compromising editorial integrity. Pioneering initiatives are already emerging, from mobile-first news startups to donor-funded investigations, charting viable paths forward. However, systemic solutions necessitate more comprehensive approaches, including policy reforms to establish a level digital playing field, strategic investment in local talent, and a fundamental reimagining of journalism's value proposition in an era saturated with information.

Today, we confront these challenges directly, exploring how African media can transform disruption into opportunity, thereby securing their vital role as pillars of democracy and development. The stakes are undeniably high; without active, future-proof institutions, the continent's digital revolution risks becoming a hollow victory, leaving citizens connected but uninformed, and societies networked but fractured.

Pillars of a Nimble Media Organisation

To thrive in this volatile landscape, media organisations must embrace innovation and resilience, guided by four crucial pillars: financial sustainability, technological adaptation, audience-centric journalism, and institutional resilience. Financial sustainability remains the most pressing concern. The over-

reliance on advertising is no longer viable, compelling media outlets to explore diverse revenue models. In Zimbabwe, 263Chat pioneered crowdfunding and SMS subscriptions, enabling readers to directly support journalism through mobile payments. Nigeria's PREMIUM TIMES, through her sister organisation, Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID), seeks to secure its future through donor-funded investigations, partnering with organisations like the MacArthur, Gates, and Open Society Foundations to fund high-impact reporting while maintaining editorial independence.

Hybrid revenue models are also gaining traction, supplementing its income through events, training programmes, and grants. Some forward-thinking publishers are even licensing their content to AI developers, ensuring fair compensation when their work is used to train algorithms. Nevertheless, these models present their own risks; dependence on foreign donors can potentially sway editorial priorities, and ethical concerns surrounding AI partnerships remain unresolved.

Technological adaptation is equally critical. Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation offer powerful tools for enhancing efficiency and expanding reach. For instance, Nigerian startup AFRIPods utilise AI-driven transcription to convert podcasts into local languages, making content accessible to non-English speakers. Similarly, the CJID's body of four AI platforms offer interesting insight into the emerging directions on tech adaptation.

First is the **DUBAWA Audio Platform** [Dubawa.ai]. The AI-powered platform specialises in monitoring and analyzing radio shows, targeting Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Ghanaian English languages, and is designed for journalists, fact-checkers and researchers, to automate the process of transcribing and extracting claims from audio content such as radio, podcasts and creating an efficient, accessible tool for verifying public

statements and detecting misinformation in real-time. The tool has so far uploaded 1300 audio files.

Secondly is the **Know Your Leader** AI-powered platform that seeks to track inconsistencies in the fragmented messages of political candidates' stances, and the provision of clear insights into their positions on key issues like healthcare, the economy, and governance from their verified statements social media, press releases, and interviews.

The **Press Attack Tracker** is CJID's digital platform for documenting and analysing attacks on journalists and media outlets across West Africa. It provides real-time reporting, a verified database of incidents, and visual insights to support advocacy, research, and legal action. Since its launch, the tool has become a vital resource for defending press freedom, informing policy, and holding perpetrators accountable.

And lastly is **UDEME**, CJID's civic tech platform that monitors government spending and infrastructure projects across Nigeria. It empowers citizens and journalists to track capital and constituency projects, report abandoned or poorly executed projects, and demand transparency. Through nationwide field investigations, crowdsourced reports, and data visualization, UDEME drives community engagement and strengthens democratic accountability.

Yet, these advancements introduce risks, particularly in the spread of deepfakes and disinformation, which have already disrupted elections across the continent. Mobile-first strategies are another essential adaptation. Kenya's Tuko News generates 90% of its traffic through WhatsApp, delivering concise, interactive news tailored for smartphone users. However, reliance on third-party platforms, such as Meta's 3FC programmes, creates vulnerabilities, as sudden algorithm changes can devastate traffic overnight.

Audience-centric journalism constitutes the third pillar of a nimble media organisation. Traditional top-down reporting is giving way to more engaged, solutions-driven approaches. In Nigeria, Barka Da Wahala actively shifts the narrative from problems to solutions, highlighting grassroots innovations like drought-resistant farming. Meanwhile, Ghana's Joy FM has adopted "listening desks," where reporters source stories directly from community gatherings rather than imposing editorial agendas. While these methods foster trust and relevance, they often require resources that many cash-strapped newsrooms struggle to allocate.

Finally, institutional resilience is paramount for long-term survival. Journalists across Africa face escalating threats, ranging from legal harassment to physical violence. Initiatives like the CJID's Press Attack Tracker provide critical support by documenting abuses and offering legal aid to persecuted reporters. Collaboration is another vital lifeline. Cross-border investigations, such as the #LuandaLeaks consortium, pool resources to expose corruption at the highest levels. Platforms like **LeaksNG** in Nigeria empower whistleblowers and facilitate collaborative follow-ups, demonstrating that solidarity can significantly amplify impact.

The path forward is clear. Media organisations must diversify revenue, harness technology responsibly, engage audiences authentically, and build robust support systems. Those that embrace these pillars will not only survive but will lead Africa's next chapter of journalism defined by resilience, innovation, and an unwavering commitment to the public good. The alternative—stagnation and decline—is simply not an option. The stakes are too high, and the continent's democratic future depends on a media that is sustainable and bold.

Digital Adaptation: A Tale of Two Futures

The contrasting fates of **The Continent** in South Africa and Nigeria's **Daily Times** vividly illustrate how digital adaptation or the lack thereof determines media survival in Africa. The Continent, a Pan-African digital weekly, embodies Manuel Castells' vision of "mass self-communication," thriving on a model that blends grassroots autonomy with global reach. By rejecting paywalls and relying on reader and philanthropic donations, it bypasses traditional gatekeepers, empowering audiences to directly support journalism that matters.

This innovative approach leveraging digital tools to foster participatory storytelling and funding stands in stark contrast to the collapse of Nigeria's Daily Times, once a media titan. The Daily Times' story, the governmental interference aside, illustrates the reality of an industrial-era model: centralised production, rigid hierarchies, and a dependence on print advertising. Its failure underscores a brutal truth: in the digital age, media organisations must adapt or perish.

Policy and Infrastructure: Enablers of Change

Governments and civil society must actively cultivate environments where innovative media can flourish. Canada's Journalism Labour Tax Credit offers a blueprint, incentivising independent journalism through fiscal policy. Following the Australian, and Canadian successes too, the South African Competition Commission Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry (MDPMI), as well as the current baby steps CJID is initiating on negotiations with big tech on digital revenue also point to new directions on sustainability initiatives.

In Nigeria, reforming exorbitant broadcast licensing fees could unleash a wave of community-driven outlets. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) like CJID and Dataphyte demonstrate the power of partnerships, advancing media freedom through

investigative reporting, climate journalism, and anti-corruption projects. These collaborations prove that when media, NGOs, and policymakers align, the democratic dividends are immense.

In Nigeria, reforming prohibitive broadcast licensing fees could unleash a wave of community-driven media outlets. CSOs like CJID and Dataphyte are already leading the way through partnerships that advance media freedom, investigative reporting, and specialised coverage of climate, corruption, elections, and natural resources.

The path forward requires concrete action. Newsrooms must adopt innovative workflows and methodologies to replace outdated structures. Investment in journalist training—particularly in AI, data literacy, and financial sustainability—is no longer optional but imperative. Building trust demands transparency through clear corrections policies and audience engagement initiatives. Platform diversification is equally crucial—from digital online platforms for youth audiences to radio for rural communities.

Ultimately, the survival of Africa's media transcends mere journalism; it is a democratic necessity. The future belongs to organisations that balance speed with ethics, profit with purpose, and innovation with tradition. The collapse of many Nigerian state government newspapers and their struggling broadcast platforms serve as a stark warning. The time for transformation is now, and the stakes could not be higher—not just for media professionals, but for the health of democracy across the continent.

Concrete Strategies for Transformation

The transformation of Africa's media landscape demands concrete, actionable strategies that address both immediate challenges and long-term sustainability. These steps must be

implemented with urgency and precision to ensure media organisations thrive in a digital and competitive environment. Outcomes from experiments like this will include reporters, data analysts, and digital producers who collaborate closely throughout the entire news production process from story conception to publication.

First and foremost, however, newsrooms must fundamentally restructure their workflows by adopting innovative systems. The traditional top-down approach to news production, with its rigid hierarchies and slow decision-making processes, is no longer viable in today's fast-paced digital world. I have repeatedly spoken about this to Nigerian journalism schools that our conception of mass communication needs advancement to Manuel Castell's mass self-communication that explains communication as a practice enabled by digital technology, particularly the internet and social media, where individuals and groups create, share and distribute content to potentially global audience unconstrained by traditional gatekeepers. This media practice, as we now know, combines the reach of traditional mass communication with the autonomy of grassroots expression, with its emphasis on user generated content and horizontal networks.

Equally critical is the need for substantial investment in talent development and upskilling. The skills required for modern journalism extend far beyond traditional reporting and writing. Today's journalists need proficiency in data analysis, AI tools, financial literacy, and multimedia storytelling. Consider the example of CJID's Campus Journalism programme which runs an intensive **Next-Gen Programme** training for undergraduates in fact-checking, investigative reporting, new business models, data mining, visualization, and forensic accounting.

Yet, upskilling must also address the business side of journalism, teaching media professionals about revenue diversification,

audience analytics, and digital monetisation strategies. A journalist who understands the financial underpinnings of their organisation can make better editorial decisions that balance public service with sustainability.

Building and maintaining audience trust represents another vital pillar of transformation. In an era of rampant misinformation, media organisations must go beyond simply publishing corrections when errors occur. I find the Nation Media Group's revolutionary transparency policy in Kenya fascinating as it includes publishing detailed editor's notes on all corrections, hosting monthly "open newsroom" events where readers can observe editorial meetings, and maintaining a public log of all ethical decisions. Their audience council, composed of 50 demographically representative readers, meets quarterly to critique coverage and suggest improvements.

This level of transparency has reportedly increased subscriber retention by 25% over three years. Other trust-building measures include clearly labeling opinion content, disclosing funding sources, and creating public-facing ombudsman positions. The **Daily Maverick** in South Africa has seen remarkable success with its "Open Newsroom" initiative, as well as the new **DevReporting** platform in Lagos, Nigeria, where journalists regularly host Twitter Spaces discussions about their reporting process.

Platform diversification is no longer optional but a survival imperative. Successful media organisations must meet audiences where they are, which requires a nuanced understanding of different demographic preferences. Uganda's **Next Media Services** provides an excellent case study with its multi-platform strategy. For youth audiences, they produce snappy, vertical video content for TikTok and Instagram Reels that explain complex political issues through humor and

animation. For rural communities with limited internet access, they have partnered with local radio stations to rebroadcast their content. Their WhatsApp newsletter, which delivers personalized news digests based on subscriber preferences, has grown to 500,000 active users.

Each platform requires tailored content strategies what works on TikTok will not necessarily work on radio or in email newsletters. The key is maintaining consistent editorial standards and brand identity across all platforms while adapting tone, format, and storytelling techniques to each medium's unique characteristics.

Advocacy and policy engagement form the final crucial component of media transformation. Individual media houses cannot solve systemic challenges like repressive laws, internet shutdowns, or unfair competition from tech platforms alone. Collective action through industry associations is essential The Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) has taken the mission of lobbying for reduced taxes on digital news platforms in several countries seriously.

In Nigeria, a coalition of media organisations recently persuaded lawmakers to drop a proposed social media bill that would have criminalized critical reporting. Media houses should dedicate resources to policy monitoring, legal defense funds, and strategic litigation. The South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) has set up an early warning system that alerts members about pending legislation affecting press freedom, allowing for coordinated responses.

These transformative steps innovative workflows, talent investment, trust-building, platform diversification, and policy advocacy are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. A newsroom that adopts these methodologies but fails to invest in digital skills will struggle. An organisation that builds audience

trust but does not diversify platforms will miss growth opportunities. The most successful transformations will be holistic, addressing operational, technological, and strategic dimensions simultaneously.

The path forward is clear but challenging. It requires courageous leadership willing to abandon outdated practices, significant upfront investment with potentially long payback periods, and a willingness to experiment and occasionally fail. However, the alternative clinging to legacy models while audiences and revenues dwindle is far worse. African media organisations that embrace this comprehensive transformation agenda will not only survive the current disruptions but emerge stronger, more sustainable, and better equipped to fulfill their democratic mission in the digital age. The time for half-measures has passed; the moment for bold, decisive action has arrived.

A Democratic Imperative

The survival of Africa's media is not merely a journalistic concern it is a democratic imperative. Agile media must balance speed with ethics, profit with purpose, and tradition with innovation. The future belongs to those who embrace change, harness technology, and centre their communities. Now is the time to act with urgency, creativity, and unwavering commitment. The continent's democracy depends on it.