

Resource document: Data access and African media

23 May 2024

Introduction:

Data in various dimensions is a relatively new issue to journalism and independent media. But it's becoming imperative for media owners, media workers and media development groups to understand and develop positions: who has access to what data for what purpose. At least eight areas can be identified which could be prioritised for action lines of a specialised task force within the African Alliance for Action to Data, leverage co-operation and diverse expertise. The areas are cross-cutting and have strong intersections with wider questions of data access and use in general.

1. Data as an input for journalism.

Many African media are *adopting data-journalism*. Using data as an input for reporting stories, is a way in which media can produce exclusives and highly unique public value. This is by reporters doing data analysis that goes beyond what already exists as publicly-available information in the form of press releases, statements of interviewees and online documents. The most obvious fields are data analysis for story telling of government spending and other economic issues, electoral patterns, climate change, traffic, health, disinformation, etc.

Media's approach in this area requires critical data literacy, data analysis competencies and data visualisation skills. It is also a question of building newsroom capacities to find and use data. Much data is opaque, whether held by governments, platforms, mining companies, etc., hence a joint media interest in pushing for this level of granular transparency in machine-usable formats.

2. Data and the production of journalism

A number of newsrooms are *testing out Generative AI*. The intersection with data here covers: a. the extent to which newsrooms' very own historical content resources can be integrated into the outputs; b. critical literacy about the way in which data bias and omissions can affect the way generative AI algorithms are producing / summarising content (not least in terms of African languages and knowledges). This points to the need for newsroom guidelines and advocacy.

3. Data, security and personal privacy

Media houses may find their journalism limited in terms of national data protection regimes, as well as find themselves becoming victims of data surveillance by authorities. However, in some dispensations (EU), media are given exemptions in terms of how they can collect and use data, and are recognised as needing special confidentiality protections as well. These are an important issue for the African media industry collectively to consider.

4. Data and the distribution and priority-ranking within journalism

To the extent that newsrooms use algorithms to personalise and rank content feeds to different audiences, the data inputs that inform this customisation need careful thought. Even without *algorithmic recommender* systems, there are issues about using data on rates of impressions (of popular content) to drive the editorial agenda with click-bait vis-à-vis public interest considerations. It is also vital that media know how social media platforms use recommender AI. For example, increasingly, platforms treat as data to be penalised (downranked) if the content contains a hyperlink in it. This is because they don't want people clicking and going out of their

walled garden. Thus, journalists posting on social media need to find work-arounds for avoid having their posts treated as this kind of data – and still drive traffic to their own websites.

5. Data and the business of journalism

Successful *membership and subscription models* for media rely on data management.

Some media houses use *tools* like Google Analytics or Meta pixels, which provides value but also gives these actors business insights into media issues. The same goes for use of AI in newsrooms – the tools send data with potential commercial value back to the AI companies.

Software dashboards to benchmark performance by means of comparative data *within the media sector* is being developed in the Internews “Media Viability Accelerator”.

Another area in this category of business and data is *advertising*. In particular, to have successful pitches for digital advertising depends on what data can help media compete against other would-be carriers who are competing in the digital ad business. Going further, the EU’s Media Freedom Act notes that: “Audience measurement has a direct impact on the allocation and prices of advertising, which represents a key revenue source for the media sector.” It therefore sets out provisions to address “information asymmetries” between platforms and media so that “audience measurement systems and methodologies made available on the market ensure an appropriate level of transparency, impartiality, inclusiveness, proportionality, non-discrimination, comparability and verifiability”.

In order to have informed *negotiations/bargaining* with platforms (as per the Australian model), data is needed to establish how much value (directly and indirectly) is generated by news on these services. In France, the competition commission ordered Google to disclose some data to have a fair playing field in the company’s discussions with media on payments. See also UNESCO: [“Data sharing to foster information as a public good.”](#)

In short, the business side of media needs to embrace and become active in data issues, including in data policy and governance and advertising markets.

6. External use of African media houses’ data

A large number of commercial entities (AI companies, PR and marketing and intelligence entities, and also NGOs) *scrape data from African media*. This is not a win-win situation in many cases for those who bear the costs of generating this content in the first place. With Google search moving towards “results” not links, a position could be developed on these issues.

7. Data and safety of journalists.

As outlined in UNESCO’s [“Data sharing to foster information as a public good”](#), as well as research by the [ICFJ](#), access to data can give early warning of online attacks against journalists. The insights can help newsrooms protect journalists under attack, and demand action by platforms and police.

8. Data and African media’s visibility / influence in policy issues

There are hundreds of global and African initiatives about regulating digital actors, applications and users, all of which implicate data. Most of these conspicuously do not have media on their radars. Yet, these initiatives impact on media in various ways, and on how media can make its unique contribution to information as a public good. African media stakeholders should not regard these as a separate universe. Leveraging networks such as the African Alliance for Access to Data can help, including by ensuring relevant AU initiatives are media-cognisant.