

Conference Report

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sef: Session at the
Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum
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Building Bridges – Journalistic Initiatives (Re)establishing Trust between World Regions

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At this year's sef: session at the Deutsche Welle (DW) Global Media Forum, we discussed how journalism can contribute to rebuilding trust which has been lost in recent crises. Our panellists were Mercy Abang, an award-winning journalist from Nigeria and Managing Director of Hostwriter, as well as Josephine Karianjahi, Düsseldorf-based Kenyan journalist and founder of the Africa Podfest. The session was moderated by DW senior correspondent Frank Hofmann.

“News coverage on Africa is an old tape played over and over”, Josephine Karianjahi pointed out in her opening statement. Stereotypical images of the African continent often date back to pre-colonial times and do not reflect the diverse reality in African countries. Repetitive tropes on Africa had already been described by Binyavanga Wainaina in his 2005 satire „How to Write About Africa“, but are still omnipresent in 21st century Western news reporting on the continent, both panellists agreed. Journalists should be aware of this, since they have a high responsibility when writing about diverse groups. And a well-balanced representation of diverse groups in the media is an important basis for establishing trust

Empowering African podcasting

To contribute to a balanced portrayal in the sector of audio media, Karianjahi founded the Africa Podfest (www.podcasting.africa), a hub connecting and empowering African podcasters and content creators. In its „Discovery Tour: Data Edition“, the company has mapped out demographics, behaviours and demands of audiences in Africa's three largest podcasting markets (Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa). An aim is to

showcase the diversity of African podcast production and enable listeners to find high-quality, trustworthy and locally produced audio in their regions. As one



sef: Executive Director Dr Marcus Kaplan opens the session

particular example, she highlighted the Women's History Museum in Zambia, which produces the podcast “Leading Ladies” showcasing female leaders in pre-colonial Zambia (available on YouTube: [@womenmuseumzambia890](https://www.youtube.com/@womenmuseumzambia890)).

“Collaborate, don't compete”: Connecting journalists internationally

Mercy Abang, co-director of Hostwriter, emphasized that “working with locals is quintessential” when reporting on Africa (or any continent), as they truly understand the situation on the ground, which can lead to more in-depth, authentic storytelling. To work

towards this goal, the global network Hostwriter allows users to connect internationally in an easy manner. Journalists writing about a certain region connect to local colleagues on the ground, with the intention to “collaborate, not compete”. This can raise the quality of media coverage by providing local contacts, while amplifying these regional voices on a global stage. As Abang said, it might even save Western journalists a trip to Africa, as “you don’t have to fly down to Nigeria to tell a story if you can collaborate with a journalist from there”.



Interactive discussion between panellists and audience

Together, journalists can increase their access to meaningful local sources, as well as their outreach to local and international media outlets. But Abang also criticized persistent hierarchies in newsrooms: Journalists from the Global North often treat their Southern colleagues as fixers or stringers rather than peers, and do not give them the credit they deserve in the form of bylines or co-authorship. Both panellists demanded that newspapers in the Global North trust African journalists with telling their own story, rather than sending someone external to cover it for them.

Pfizer’s illegal drug testing and vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria

During the Covid 19 crisis, several international news articles criticized the hesitancy of many Nigerians, especially in rural regions, to get vaccinated. Reporters often blamed their scepticism on a lack of education or superstition. A major reason, however, remained unmentioned: Back in 1996, during a meningitis outbreak in the Northern state of Kano, the U.S. pharmaceutical company Pfizer had distributed unlicensed trial drugs to the local population. This had resulted in several deaths and many long-term health issues among the population, followed by a long-drawn legal dispute between families, the state of Nigeria and Pfizer.

This incident is still very present in many Nigerians’ memories and contributed considerably to the vaccine hesitancy in many communities. As Abang put it, “If Pfizer did this to a mother’s child, how do you expect her to now accept the Covid vaccine without questions?” This is a striking example how media from the Global North can fail to cover the full truth of a story in the Global South, if journalists do not know about the history of a place or society and do not include local perspectives sufficiently. Such inattentive reporting has the potential to deepen the wounds caused by the exploitative behaviour of Pfizer decades ago.

Making journalism more inclusive

Hostwriter’s “Unbias the News” picks up stories such as the one about Pfizer’s action in Nigeria and makes it available to wider audiences. It is a newsroom working towards a more equitable and inclusive world of journalism by supporting journalists experiencing structural barriers in the field. As Abang emphasized, any journalists can pitch a story to them, irrespective of their standing or affiliation. Writers are not chosen by their credentials, but purely by the potential and value of their stories.

Both panellists agreed that amplifying voices from marginalized groups, working together with local journalists and trusting them to tell their own story are important steps towards making journalism more inclusive across various dimensions. This can result in a more nuanced representation of reality in the media, which may lead to “new networks of trust”, as Kari-anjahi put it, helping to overcome existing divides between world regions. The sef: session at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum has hopefully succeeded in showcasing initiatives working towards that goal.



Panellists and organizers after the session