

# ENHANCING DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS: THE MEDIA IN MAURITIUS

---

*Amadou Mahtar Ba*

*CEO AFRICAN MEDIA INITIATIVE (AMI)*

*Keynote Speech, University of Mauritius*

*September 16, 2010. Mauritius*

**Greetings,**

**I am so glad to be here this afternoon in this temple of knowledge to discuss what I believe is one of the most important components of open societies: the existence of a free, independent, ethical and professional media.**

**It's truly an honour to be among like-minded individuals who share in the recognition that the media remain a central pillar in building strong democracies, economies, and societies.**

**Quite frankly though talking about such a serious subject in such a beautiful country as Mauritius while we can go enjoy the sun and the beach is not necessarily my preference. Dr Kassenaly that is the reason why I hesitated to before accepting to be this today.**

**Let me start my remarks by clearly stating that I am not an academic and therefore please**

**forgive me if I use a more casual language compared to what you are used to hearing at the university.**

**Having said that, I, however, think I can contribute by sharing my personal perspectives – those of an African media executive who has spent several years in the private media sector in Africa and in the USA and who is continuing to work toward reshaping the future of the African media landscape through an international non profit institution called the African Media Initiative (AMI).**

**DEFARATU                      DEFARATU  
DEFARATU                      DEFARATU**

**Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends and colleagues, in delivering his opening address to the Ghanaian Parliament in July 2009, President Barack Obama stated what most of us here if not all would applaud. He said: “An independent press is part of the capable, reliable and transparent institutions that will lead Africa to success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”**

**I believe this is one of the most powerful statements President Obama made during his**

**trip to Africa as President of the United States. It is a statement on which all Africans and friends of the continent must build to push the agenda for a friendlier environment for media development.**

**Since President Obama gets it, what can we do to help ensure that his policies follow this vision? What can we do to ensure that other world leaders also recognize the importance of an independent press and then facilitate its emergence and support it?**

**So friends, what do we know? What makes so many policy makers around the world, academics and other thinkers believe that media play such a crucial role in enhancing our democratic systems? Let us look around the world and try to understand why.**

**In 1842 Latin America, a revolutionary named Simon Bolivar declared that the masses need to be educated using public debates, newspapers and books.**

**In the United States, in 1787, Thomas Jefferson the third American President, boldly declared :  
“The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object**

**should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter”.**

**In London, in 1900 at the first Panafrican Congress led by W.E.B. Dubois the famous African American visionary, the first decision taken was to build a panafrican news network to help educate the world about the living conditions of black people and particularly those in Africa under colonial domination. Sixty three years later, in Ethiopia, at the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) the ancestor of today’s African Union, the founding leaders, in their first declaration, called for exactly the same thing. The OAU decision led to the creation of the Panafrican News Agency, PANA, years later as an Intergovernmental organization where I started my professional career in the media sector by helping restructure and privatize it.**

**In Asia, the Economics Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen argues in his book *Poverty and Famine* that no country with multi-party politics and free media has ever suffered from famine.**

**So, that is what we know, and through all these examples, what is striking is throughout history, many thinkers asserted that the media are an essential public good. The media can accomplish civic education and provide people with knowledge of their rights, duties and safeguards. Through media, whether community radio stations, local newspapers or television programmes, especially in local languages, it is possible to develop the most remote areas. All these possibilities, including building linkages among different cultural and ethnic groups, are the foundation of our nations.**

**Let me put it even more strongly by making an analogy with the human body: if the lungs are essential to the health of the body, it is the oxygen which they process which is the key to life. The media is the oxygen of the body politic when we talk of good governance, accountability and democracy. You can have all the vital organs: heart, brain, and liver but without oxygen the body shuts down and dies.**

**Similarly democracy needs elections, parliament, separation of powers, a vibrant**

**civil society and a private sector. But without the media, democracy in modern societies and economies just cannot work.**

**It becomes then as if around the world, visionary leaders have supported the view that the media has a special role in our societies and therefore deserve protection from any type of hindrance, and particularly from any form of government censorship and regulation. After all, press freedom results from the longstanding view that the media help us find the truth - often by holding government representatives and others accountable for crimes, corruption and ineptitude. The media can also help us identify their achievements and successes, a role which is sometimes conveniently forgotten.**

**We have many examples to demonstrate the key role of media in enhancing democracy.**

**For instance, in early 2000, at the highest point of the conflict in a country of francophone West Africa (which though we are among friends, will remain nameless to protect the guilty), I visited the head of state. I thought that I could be helpful in convincing him to release 2 public radio journalists arrested for reporting about the unrest in the country. I**

**also wanted to talk to him about releasing the funds promised to support the nascent vibrant private media.**

**After listening to me very carefully, he only had one question “Why would I help feed the monster that wants me out of my seat”? Since that day, I have come to strongly believe that it is a fallacy to think that dictators do not know the importance of the role media can play. I believe that, in fact, it is exactly because they know and understand the media well that they choose to crack down on this sector. It is also that knowledge and understanding that drives leaders of coups d'état to always secure radio and TV stations right at the onset.**

**Second example: Has anybody seen the documentary movie “Pray the Devil Back to Hell”? Its about the Liberian Peace Talks in Accra in 2003 mediated by Nigerian General and former head of state Abdusalami Abubakar?**

**The movie demonstrates the role of women peace activists in forcing rebel leaders and government officials to reach a peace agreement. These fearless women used radios and cell phones to target and mobilize other**

women to converge onto the meeting venue blocking all exit doors so that no one could leave the negotiations until an accord was signed.

Third example. Most recently, many journalists have been jailed in the aftermath of the disputed elections results in Iran. When President Ahmedinejad was asked about it in an interview with NPR while visiting the UN headquarters in New York, he said that to his knowledge no journalist was in jail because of their reporting negatively on him or his government and he asked for names. Less than a week later, the journalist mentioned in the interview was released.

Through these examples, we can see the role of the media as well as information and communication technologies in building strong democracies based on justice and equality.

But if we all know this argument, and accept it, what are we doing to help strengthen media in the places where it is most needed?

Let me emphasize that, strong independent media does not occur in a vacuum. A society also needs other strong institutions, the judiciary in particular.

**For this reason, I challenge all of us here to start thinking about the holistic nature of media and of media development. We must all become advocates within the private sector, development institutions, development partners and our own governments about the necessity to focus greater attention to the media sector.**

**Innovative efforts which look to include media front and centre in global efforts to promote democratic governance and accountability need to be given much higher priority. BECAUSE.....**

**First and foremost, a strong, independent and professional media are central to achieving and maintaining good governance and accountability and all the positive good that stems from having responsible and accountable authority. Media are irreplaceable public watchdogs providing a platform for a well informed citizenry to endorse or sanction its leaders.**

**In addition, media that perform their watchdog role, making government actions transparent, can help spur economic development overall by making it more difficult for public funds to**

**be wasted in unnecessary projects or disappear from state coffers into the pockets and accounts of a few.**

**Second, a strong, independent and professional media help build confidence for economic investment by signalling that impunity has no place in the system.**

**Third, a strong, independent and professional media is a source for credible information in areas as vast and different as health matters, environmental concerns, cultural events, entertainment, and the list goes on.**

**Friends, if this is true, then we face another challenge. That we must recognize much of the investment in media in Africa thus far has yielded poor returns. While they sometime look good on paper, many of the programs to support media development over the years have not given us the results we would have hoped. The figure of about 250 to 300 million dollars being spent annually on media development is probably a conservative estimate. But what do we have to show for this investment?**

**Allow me here to mention the example of the African Media Initiative (AMI) which I believe is**

**an innovative and holistic way to secure strong and independent media across the continent so that it can effectively help promote democratic governance and accountability, economic development and human progress.**

**This initiative, inspired by the Commission for Africa recommendations on the eve of the G8 Summit in Gleneagles, was developed following the largest ever consultation and research process on the media in Africa, under the auspices of the UN Economic Commission for Africa and the BBC World Service Trust. It concluded that there is significant public and private underinvestment in Africa's media sector and that efforts need to be of greater scale and strategic focus.**

**AMI research and consultation specifically found that:**

- *Despite sector growth, professionalization is patchy with standards low and training programs tending to be static, short-term and lacking impact.***
- *Little to no attention is paid to business and management training.***

- *The changing technology landscape is both a huge opportunity and a black hole of knowledge for most media houses and practitioners.*
- *Accreditation systems are still used as political tools by governments.*
- *Enabling environments for free media and for increased private investment oftentimes are inconsistent and remain restrictive.*

**These findings represent serious problems for anyone concerned about enhancing democratic systems, governance and accountability of our nations.**

**As demonstrated by the AMI research and consultation, accepted values and roles for the media based on global best practice or even the formally agreed policies of the AU are not well rooted. The media's operation is susceptible to both external and internal controls (state pressure, regulation, and control; as well as the use of private media to pursue narrow or hidden political, religious, or ethnic goals).**

To address these core constraints, AMI defined a vision of an African media that is pluralistic, largely sustainable, free and responsive to the needs and interests of its audiences.

AMI believes that while state/public media and community media remain critical, it is the private media which will drive the media and information revolution in Africa. AMI will focus on the importance of fostering and supporting leadership standards to implement agreed policies and ethical practices across the sector and emphasising the fundamental importance of improving economic sustainability through new revenue streams, investments and adapting to changing technologies.

I would love the opportunity to talk more about AMI with those interested. For now, let me return to the topic of the day.

**All the examples I have evoked reassure us in our beliefs that media play a critical role in building democracy, support economic growth and remain a pillar of our societies. But having said that, we must not sit back and rest on our laurels in this knowledge.**

**Haven't we seen media play a negative, indeed destructive role too? Do we not have examples of that?**

**Indeed, I have discussed the positive role of media but there are too many examples, from Rwanda to Zimbabwe, Kenya, Guinea and Somalia, where media have participated in unleashing the devils and showing the worst part of human nature.**

**We all know the devastating role played by Radio Milles Collines in the genocide in Rwanda, the role of ethnic radio in Kenya in inciting post election violence, and the use of radio, Internet, and media technologies by al-Shabaab in perpetuating violence throughout Somalia.**

**We are not here today to expand on these and other "worst practices." However, I really do believe that we have to learn from these sad lessons. We must consider them as loud calls to vigorously embark on serious long term and strategic focus on the media. We must avoid repeating the worst chapters of our collective history.**

**I opened with the words of past and present leaders from around the globe who all spoke of the important role of the media in building democratic and successful nations. On the American soil, over two hundred years separate Jefferson from Obama and both view media as a sine qua non condition for building strong democracies and societies.**

**Yet, even with centuries of experience, venerable American media institutions are under siege, not having figured out how to harness new media technologies. The same scenario is developing on our continent where we are witnessing large media houses become almost irrelevant to the benefit of very small ventures (sometimes no more than 3 people) that have perfected the use of new information and communication technologies, the mobile phone in particular.**

**While these new technologies open up and enlarge the media space, it is crucial to pay sustained attention to the professionalism and ethics in the sector as a whole, new and traditional media alike.**

**This poses the important debate about regulation of the media sphere and the tendency in many African countries to move from voluntary self regulating media council systems to statutory media appeals bodies, including in democratically advanced countries like South Africa.**

**I profoundly believe that a self regulatory mechanism with an Ombudsman capable of ordering a correction or an apology anytime a media is found guilty is far more effective than a statutory mechanism which imposes heavy fines and jail terms. Indeed the Ombudsman says Raymond Louw, Chairman of the Press Council of South Africa, strikes at the heart of a news organisation's operations. By publishing a correction and an apology, readers and the audience at large are told that the media was not only inaccurate but that it behaved unprofessionally or even dishonestly.**

**In my view, nothing damages a newspaper more than a ruling against its credibility and trustworthiness. If the public loses its trust in a news organization it inevitably goes out of business, thus enduring the ultimate sanction.**

**I want to close by insisting that in establishing or enhancing democratic systems we must not fall into the easy path of advocating for regular elections, or even setting up pseudo separate powers alone. A much broader view is needed. A view in which independent, professional and ethical media have a central place. And it is our common duty to frame that view and advocate for it. After all, lets keep in mind that elections represent a key moment in both conflict resolution and conflict escalation. So without an informed citizenry, thanks to free and professional media, elections alone are not helpful.**

**In concluding, i could not find a better place to meditate on the question about what makes the coffee sweet than here in Mauritius - Is it the sugar or is it the act of stirring it?**

**Likewise, let us ask ourselves what makes democracy work? Is it having elections or an independent and professional media? I believe that what makes our societies sweet and the best way of enhancing our democratic systems is having a media that can periodically stir the pot while at the same time ensuring that it can**

**uncover the best and the worst of our societies.**

**I look forward to listening to your bright ideas over the course of the next two days. If we are successful in Mauritius and on this continent in enhancing our democratic systems through media, I am sure that we will learn best practices that can be employed worldwide.**

**I thank you all very much.**