



# PARTNERSHIPS NOT HANDOUTS

Nairobi-based photojournalist and entrepreneur **Salim Amin** is the son of the late photographer and cameraman Mo Amin. He now runs the family company, **Camerapix**, and is Chairman of the **Mohamed Amin Foundation**. In his quest to help raise journalistic standards and challenge censorship, Salim established **A24 Media**, Africa's first online agency for video and stills content. We asked him: What are the opportunities to take part in African media?

**T**he opportunities are vast if you have good content. The mobile phone revolution on the continent has given content owners another platform to reach people and the internet, with fibre optic cable being laid around the continent, is also going to expand rapidly. The whole future of content distribution in Africa is going to be through the mobile phone, there is no doubt about that in my mind.

The key is that Africans really want to see African content. They don't want to see so much international content, they want to see content that is relevant to their lives and they are willing to pay for it.

In our business we have seen this massive shift in audience interest over the last ten months, that has changed our revenue streams as well, where 80% of our revenue is now coming from African broadcasters and African

carriers of content as opposed to international broadcasters which was our original model. Africa's state broadcasters are becoming more commercial, but there is also space being opened up for private channels, more and more radio stations, more newspapers.

#### How free are commercial broadcasters in their news reporting?

Let's take Kenya as an example. Kenya is perceived to be one of the freest media spaces on the continent with now almost 12 TV channels, probably 70 or 80 radio stations around the country, dozens of newspapers.

Behind the scenes there is a very different scenario because the majority – probably 96% - of these media outlets are owned in some way by politicians. Politicians have understood the power of the media, they understood the ownership factor – how it can help with their campaigning in future elections.

The problem is, how do we keep the media independent and away

from the people in power, when in order to make money media houses need to have this investor base which unfortunately most of the time is led by politicians.

#### Where do they get the money from?

The politicians are corrupt in just about every country on the continent. So the money is ill gotten gains from deals that they have been doing on the side and which is then put into media to consolidate their political position. This is my biggest concern about the media in Africa - while there is a lot of media coming up, how independent and how objective is it?

In Kenya we saw in the last election how the radio stations, particularly the vernacular radio stations, were responsible for some of the violence that took place because they were spreading hate speech. And without some sort of regulation or control it's going to become an increasingly bigger problem. The government obviously can draw up guidelines,

but I think it has to be a self-regulating industry. However, if the ownership stays the way it is now, that self-regulation is never going to happen. So it's a real dilemma.

We as a business have managed to steer clear of that because we are operating as a pan-African media organisation, we don't have any particular affiliation to any one country, we just happen to be based in Kenya. We also like to think of ourselves as completely apolitical, we just want to tell good stories. We need more organisations like ourselves that are looking at the bigger picture, are looking beyond borders and are not beholden to particular powers.

Censorship is a big issue in countries like Eritrea, in Ethiopia, even in countries like South Africa where they are trying to put in place new media regulation to muzzle and control the media.

#### What are A24's aims?

A24 in a nutshell is a content aggregator. We basically gather content, either content that we produce ourselves or from contributors - freelance journalists, African broadcasters, NGOs that send us content on a daily basis from around the continent, mainly feature stories.

We are not a hard news agency yet, we hope to be getting to that point as the communication and infrastructure improves around the continent. We verify the content, it goes through our editorial filters, we add footage from our massive archive if we feel the story needs more context or more background, we put it up on our portal and distribute it to both broadcasters within Africa and to broadcasters around the world. 60% of any revenues we receive for a particular piece we give to the contributors but most importantly we ensure that the contributor keeps the copyright of their work, unless of course they want to sell it to a channel for exclusive use.

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African story tellers and journalists to (1), earn more revenue, and (2), keep ownership of their content because we feel they will then have the ability to earn revenues for many years to come.

The lesson on copyright was learned from my father's time because he kept the copyright of everything and this is why we are sitting on possibly one of the largest archives on African history anywhere in the world: three and a half million photographs and over 10,000 hours of video. We also now take on different types of longer form content, like serials, sitcoms, soap operas and start distributing them to other African broadcasters and creating those links between broadcasters that they have never had before.

Slowly African broadcasters are understanding that they have to pay for African content, and advertisers are also understanding that people want to see this and therefore are putting their sponsorship behind African-made products.

#### Does content produced in East Africa work in Southern or West Africa?

The content definitely works. If you look at the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood, they are producing tens of thousands of films every year. It's the third largest industry in the world.

The product is terrible in most cases in terms of production qualities, but the amount of sales that they make – DVDs, VCDs – around the continent is in the hundreds of thousands if not millions, simply because the stories that these films focus on are ones that every African can relate to. The one thing that we have in common throughout the continent is our problems.

#### What about the standard of production values?

There has to be investment in training, that's key. On the feature film side bigger studios have to come, and more training of sound engineers, directors of photography,

set builders and so on. What has to change is that broadcasting media houses have to understand that they need to have specialist reporters, they need to have investigative journalists in different fields, in business, in entertainment, in sport, in art, and in news and politics, reporters that understand the issues they are covering.

The training also has to extend to media managers. They've got to be educated in how independent journalism is supposed to work, how to give their journalists freedom to go and report, not have them constantly restricted, and not deploy them to do things that are not their speciality.

Journalists also need to be paid a lot better. The fact that they get paid so little leads to them being easily influenced by the powers that be, either politicians or corporates. The journalists might have a lot of pride and love for what they do but the brown envelope will continue to change hands as they have to eat at the end of the day.

#### Are people willing to accept help from outside?

The idea of handouts being given to us is becoming less and less palatable for Africans. They would like to do it themselves but we are restricted because we don't have the infrastructure. There has to be some sort of partnership, it's got to be done as somebody investing in us where hopefully there is a return.

In an ideal world I'd like to see that any assistance that comes to the continent in terms of training has a return, either a revenue share or a return in terms of content. We are doing this at A24 because part of our organisation has a large training component with the Mohamed Amin Foundation.

For example we have just trained 14 journalists from Somalia. But we did not just train them and send them back - using the A24 platform, the content they produce from now



◀ Students at Nairobi's newly-opened iHub

▶ Salim Amin

▼ Masai watching television



on will come back to us and we will then market this content. So as long as they continue to provide us with content, we will give revenue shares back to these journalists. And pretty much everybody is happy. Hopefully this will translate into good well-told stories coming out of Somaliland that have not been seen before.

The newer NGOs, the media savvy organisations see the value of not just training people and forgetting about them but having this constant flow of content coming out that can be received by them and the rest of the world. The traditional organisations are missing the point completely. I don't think they get anything back from what they put in.

#### How is TV in Africa overcoming the problem of the many languages?

In most countries there is a main language that most people understand. What we are doing with our content is to put subtitles on but then again a lot of people can't read. I really don't like voicing over other people's languages because it takes away the magic and the charm. If the pictures are

strong, if you shoot a story properly people will still understand what the story is about.

So much of the conflict on the continent arises because of this diversity of tribes in Africa. People are focusing on the differences rather than the unifying factors. And I think TV could play such a major role in that – for example with a soap opera that has people talking in different languages, communicating, intermarrying, having a normal life but still maintaining their own individualism and their own language.

And Facebook and Twitter are opening up avenues for people to communicate in their own language – even in a slang that everybody of their generation understands.

Certainly with the younger generation, the talent is there, you have just got to give them the tools and they'll go. Look at the concept of the iHub, these technology centres set up by entrepreneurs that provide good internet connection and access to laptop for tech innovators. There are a dozen of these hubs around the continent in

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different countries. Kids can come in, exchange ideas and develop things and will hopefully make money. Web sites like Ushahidi which is a Kenyan born and built site have gone way beyond Kenya – it was hugely successful in Haiti during the earthquake, bringing crowdsourcing technology together.

#### And the outlook?

The future for African media is bright. There are a lot of challenges that we have to overcome, but the talent is there to overcome there, the desire is there and the work ethic is there. I would hope that in a few years' time African media would be reasonably independent, and will show every aspect of life from an African perspective. I would love to see an African media that comes out united to say 'This is who we are, this is what we do and this is where we are going. Yes, we need your help but come in and help us as partners. Make money, leave, stay, whatever you want, but understand it belongs to us. It's our continent, we need to sort it out.'

Salim Amin, thank you very much.