

The CBA and World Bank partner for 21st century training

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"Beam us in Tamrat. Are you there? This is a site check." These words sound like the opening lines to the next generation of a Star Trek series, like Captain Kirk calling Scotty to levitate him to the spaceship Enterprise. But it is not Star Trek. It's a video-conference. They were the opening words spoken weekly from Washington to Ethiopia, and seven other sites in English-speaking Africa where 175 working journalists met by video-conference between January and March for a series of two-hour training sessions in investigative journalism.

Over 10 weeks, we met every Tuesday at 9:00 a.m. Washington, D.C. time - 4:00 p.m. in Addis Ababa, and earlier in West Africa. The training team in DC delivered the course from a state-of-the-art studio at the World Bank, and the participants gathered in video-conference (VC) facilities in Abuja, Accra, Addis Ababa, Dar es Salaam, Kampala, Lilongwe, Yaounde, and Maputo (where ten English-speaking journalists were recruited).

It was not a series of dry lectures that brought these folks together, that is too static, too soporific. No, the journalists participated in a series of inter-active exchanges involving cross-site dialogues and other learning processes, including expert inputs from Washington.

Here is the way it works. Prior to a session, technicians in DC build the network for that day's VC the way people at many telephone lines bring successive persons into a telephone conference-call. But instead of telephone lines, the medium is satellite transmission waves. When the net was assembled, there were nine sites connected, eight in African cities, and one in Washington. When each session commenced, participants would see and hear the introduction from the Washington trainer, Roderick Macdonell, on their over-sized TV screens. When Macdonell would then turn to facilitator Lloyd Evans to come in from Accra, Lloyd and his class-room of 20 Ghanaians appeared on everyone's screen, and dialogue commenced, and on and on it would go. Sometimes when a site would get impatient for their turn to speak and be seen cross-site, and interact, they'd send an e-mail with their input to the discussion. A two-hour session flies by when you are having a good time - so to maximize the learning experience, participants met one hour before each session and would read the materials for that session, sent by e-mail attachment from HQ.



Trainers Tim Carrington (left top) and Roderick Macdonell in Washington link-up live via video with trainees in Ghana.

Why would the World Bank Institute, the teaching arm of the bank, want to train African journalists in Investigative Journalism? The words "Investigative Journalism" have a special subversive ring to them. They conjure up images of the press overturning vicious regimes by exposing their putrid underbellies to the world. No. It is not that radical. But for a body better known for its cautious economic prescriptions, the World Bank is set upon a bold strategy - promoting the practice of Investigative Journalism in order to help curb corruption in developing and transitional nations.

There is a theoretical underpinning. Economists at the World Bank have observed that prosperous nations all have one thing in common, their press is relatively free. Hence they have concluded that a free press is a

pre-condition to prosperity. Furthermore, the economists know that corruption is among the most serious impediments to development. The recent investigative journalism (IJ) offering to Africa covered subjects such as defining IJ, identifying constraints, access-to-information, document research, investigating the budget, Internet as a research tool, safety and security for investigative reporters, executing an investigative project and money-laundering.

In addition, participants undertook investigative projects that were mentored and monitored from DC. Participants, working in groups, chose their story subjects based on feasibility and the public interest of the project. Many are still working on stories such as a travelers cheque scam (Ghana); law school examination fraud, police extortion of indigents and university admission wrongdoing (Abuja); education department embezzlement, nepotism in police hiring, hijinks in a highway construction project, and a bungled textile mill privatization (Addis Ababa); and a questionable remedial teaching program (Cameroon).

Setting aside the technology-driven glitz, does distance learning work? Yes according to the results of evaluative questionnaires. Participants still prefer the far more expensive face-to-face workshops, and the high-technology sometimes fails, but all in all, the participants consider that they learn as much or more by this form of learning.

CBA member station's who were asked to invite staff to attend the course: Cameroon Radio and Television, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, Radio Mocambique, Televisao De Mocambique, Voice of Nigeria, Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, Nigerian Television Authority, Radio Uganda, ITV and Radio Tanzania, Malawi Broadcasting Corporation