

Networking
for Alter-information
and Against Repression
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With the migration of the World Social Forum to the African Continent, transnational ties of media networks are being strengthened and the idea of an interactive media network is taking shape.

In 2011, a number of West African movements and organizations took part in the Caravan for Free Movement and Fair Development to the World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal. On the Island of Gorée, before the WSF took place, the World Charter of Migrants was launched. One of the results of the Caravan was the creation of the transnational network Afrique-Europe-Interact (AEI) 1 .

The question was raised of not only how to disseminate the necessary information but also how to enable social movements to communicate with each other and with the wider public. Last year at the World Forum at Free Media, we were discussing the need to expand the network of free media and to strengthen ties with Northern and Western African media activists, so as not to leave it to journalists entrenched in interventionist armies or the ever fewer mainstream journalists in the area to inform the public about what companies, corrupt administrators and ministers and both national and international armies want the public to know – or rather what they DON'T want them to know.

Communication rights campaigns would enable free media to be more secure and more sustainable over the long run, and North African and West African

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AEI: www.afrique-europe-interact.net

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Cyber café.

media networks 2 are currently working to get these underway. But even in those countries where rights are assured – like Tunisia with the adoption of the new constitution – they are not being implemented without public pressure. The

threat that so-called secure rights will be taken away is always a possibility, as seen in the example of Egypt.

Elsewhere, military conflicts in Libya and Mali and the ongoing conflicts in the DR Congo 3 , including threats and repression of often-unidentifiable sources are an ever-present reality. And even the most basic resources to create local and free media are lacking, such as community radio, Internet cafés and public screenings.

In this article I will explore three cases from Central, Western and Northern Africa concerning activists from the Afrique–Europe-Interact network. All three cases are similar in that the mainstream media failed, for various reasons, to cover their stories. They are also alike in the fact that a lack of communication rights has prevented the development of alternative media and their long-term consolidation.

But in all three cases there has been an attempt to create an infrastructure from the grassroots level, to break isolation and get through to the public. And in all

[2] As for example those participating in the conference "Promoting and Defending Freedom of Expression in the MENA Region", held in May 2014 in Tunis, and the World Association of Community

Radio Broadcasters (AMARC: www2.amarc.org/), West Africa.

[3] These wars are also know as the ‘African World War’ with about six million deaths over the last 20 years.

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three cases transnational ties with free media in other continents have played an important role. The idea is to strengthen these ties for the benefit of social movements in the global South and North and to facilitate the exchange of news and background information that is usually absent from the mainstream media but which is of utmost importance to activists and victims of human rights violations.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Victor Nzuzi Mbembe is a well-known journalist and land rights activist who joined the Caravan for Free Movement and Fair Development in its journey to the World Social Forum and represents AEI in the DR Congo. He is often featured on mainstream radio and television and also has his own programs on the community radio in the Mbanza Ngungu district where he works as a small-

scale peasant. As an outspoken critic of landgrabbing and the corruption surrounding mega projects between the Congolese government and transnational companies, he has emerged as a defender of the local population and is being targeted by the various authorities trying to silence him: "In my country, the so-called Democratic Republic of Congo, there are a lot of radio stations, not only in the capital of Kinshasa but also in the rural areas. And there are more than 30 television channels, but they usually belong to influential politicians or the evangelical / Christian churches. The same is true for the press. Politicians and churches own most of the newspapers and there is a very close alliance between the mainstream media and political influence. If, here in Congo, you have the financial resources, you can easily appear in ten radio and TV programmes a day and have your opinion published in all the papers. What matters is how much you pay, not what the message is. The content of the media is clearly orientated in maintaining the political influence of the owner.

So there is an urgent need for alternative media which takes an analytical approach and is not governed by commercial and political interests. Technically, this can be as simple as viewing DVDs or listening to tapes of radio programs or having a caravan with live music and debates in the villages – which we have planned for the summer. This is one way of making our struggle visible throughout the world and to let people see what is happening even if they are in Germany, Belgium or France.

At an international level, I would like to mention Brazil and South Africa as emerging countries where it is hard to talk about their economic successes without mentioning their inequalities and the environmental problems. In Congo we were led to believe that Brazil is a role model in managing the rain forest and yet Brazilian companies continue to drill for oil in the Congolese rain forest, even though the damage caused by oil drillings in the Amazon are well-known. One example of international cooperation could be talking with our colleagues in Brazil so that we can get a better idea of the real situation of Brazil's rain forest management. That could really influence the discussion here. Similarly, the struggles of activists in Europe for the free movement of migrants and refugees, against landgrabbing, for food sovereignty and for debt relief is NOT known here. In defence of the global south's natural resources, we could also work together

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exchanging information on the way in which multinationals' have stripped our resources: this would mean waking up the population in the South and putting pressure on those responsible in the North.

In my case, as a victim of repression and with the threat of fifteen years of prison for influencing the public opinion, the transnational network in Germany, Belgium, France and Senegal has played an important role. With the Internet, my colleagues were able to react and help me. Yes, it really is a small world."

Niger Delta

Alassane Dicko is president of the Association Malienne des Expulsés (AME: www.expulsesmaliens.info) which was founded in coordination with Radio Kayira due to massive deportations of Malians from various African and European countries in the 1990s. The AME is a founding member of the transnational network Afrique-Europe-Interact (AEI).

In April 2014, a small group from AEI went to the Niger delta region to contact the peasants who fought fiercely for years against land grabbing in their territory (in the region of Sanamadougou and Sao). The local population – around 50,000 people – is now seriously threatened by starvation due to the theft of their land. When they went to court to protest against their land being taken away from them, police forces came into the villages and violently attacked the villagers, leading to the death and serious injuries of several people, including the mayor of Sanamadougou.

Alassane Dicko: "Information and communication is central to what peasants are fighting for. The villages concerned had no access to any information until we came with the caravan. The territory is so vast and there is no public transport, so peasants had no way of communicating with people in other villages. We needed to set up collective meetings so that everyone could understand each other's reality and to rouse a feeling of mutual solidarity. We also talked about everyone rallying together in case of emergency.

The community and rural radio stations in all twelve zones don't even attempt to address these issues, even though they are well-known problems, and some unions have started representing the peasants. But the peasants have lost all confidence in the representatives of these unions who previously supported the administration of the Niger delta region, which is itself supporting the investor. They are tired after years of accusations and threats against those who resist this colonial

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Niger Delta, April 2010. Environnementaml Rights Action activists in Nigeria look at damage caused by oil tankers.

administration. There are many peasants who work hard for the benefit of the colonists. Since the land grabbing started, the land they have at their disposition is not enough to feed their extended families. Added to this is the deterioration of the soil due to agro-industrial use. 50,000 people in the area will either die from starvation or they will be forced into the dangerous adventure of migration."

This case also urgently needs the media's attention. And the local population needs communication tools. Often it is also a matter of distributing local information both nationally and transnationally. There is a film about the situation in the Niger delta, called *Terre Verte*. It gives a very good account of it, but due to lack of Internet access and the lack of transnational relations, the film has not yet reached the wider public.

AEI is trying to make contact with the filmmaker and publish it on their website.

Cameroun

Geraud and Trésor also participated in the caravan in 2011. Years before the caravan to Dakar, they had been forced to leave their home country Cameroun due to threats against homosexuals in Cameroun and to the fact that there was a severe crack down on the student strikes in which they participated. On their way to North Africa they were held back in Mali and there joined the Association des Réfoules d'Afrique Centrale en Mali (ARACEM), also a founding member of AEI. During the last two years of their long migration route, which took them across more than 25 borders, they lived in the forest in miserable clandestine camps near the border fences of Ceuta and Melilla. There, they encountered all sorts of brutality and violence. They were also one of the first to hear about the killing of fifteen refugees on the 6th of February 2014

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by Moroccan and Spanish police forces. Those comrades who were unable to cross the sea or get past the fences sent them pictures of the dead corpses thrown on the loading platform of a truck. They posted pictures and information on the incidents on their newly established site *Voix des Migrants* (www.voixdesmigrants.com). Trésor said that it was the only way for refugees, hiding from the police, to contact the outer world and to tell their side of the story. The site is also a source of hope for those trapped between the sea, the bladed fences and the desert. It is a connection to a world that seeks to deny their very existence, Trésor adds. And

it is a way to deal with all the cries for help which arrive daily from Morocco. On the blog they also describe the conditions of survival for Central, West- and East African refugees in Morocco. Since the EU established the Frontex frontier regime, racism has increased sharply against Black Africans in Morocco. Geraud says that it is like an apartheid system in which they have to survive, without any basic human rights and subjected to police and racist attacks.

With the publication of various articles by activist journalists, the blog and protests outside Moroccan and Spanish Embassies in different countries, this issue has received increased media attention. The next step will be giving refugees in Morocco access to computers and mobile phones so that the wider public can learn about the human rights violations that are taking place.

In conclusion, the overall challenge that alternative media and communication activists face is strengthening the transnational network of alternative media, and fighting for their recognition – which is often their only resource and their only shield against repression. As for the concerned population, there is not only a lack of information and communication but there is also little awareness of the potential support available in the form of movements and NGOs in the global north. Alternative media and communication rights campaigns could play an important role in strengthening ties between movements in the global South and North and in supporting activist networking.

There is a need for media networks that can provide information on a regular basis - not only in times of mass protests or when there is some particularly gruesome human rights violation. In addition, alternative media should have access to the structural resources needed to carry out thorough investigative work. It is for this reason that the current campaigns for media reform and financing of alternative media in Latin America offer some hope for communication rights movements in other parts of the world. It is clear that work of the World Forum of Free Media is of utmost importance and should be extended to Central and Eastern Africa as well. An important step for the near future could also be coming up with a way – potentially again in the form of caravans – to bring media activists and movement activists to the next World Forum of Free Media in Tunis in 2015 in order to expand the network.