

Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan  
at the Conference Marking the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the Nation Media Group:  
“Media and the African Promise.”  
Nairobi, March 18, 2010.

His Excellency Mwai Kibaki, President of the Republic of Kenya

His Excellency Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda

His Excellency Kalonzo Musyoka, Vice President of Kenya

Rt. Hon. Raila Amolo Odinga, Prime Minister of Kenya

His Excellency Joaquim Chissano, former President of Mozambique

His Excellency Benjamin Mkapa, former President of the United Republic of Tanzania

Hon. Samuel Poghiso, Minister for Information and Communication, Republic of Kenya

Honourable Ministers

Your Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen

I am genuinely pleased to join you at this conference - an event which looks back at a distinguished past, and ahead to a daunting future.

The presence at this conference of President Kibaki and many other government leaders, past and present, has immense importance for me personally and for the Nation Media Group. For there is no doubt that relations between governments and the media are central to the future of Africa, challenging and even exasperating as that experience at times may be.

In many respects, this has been a new challenge for Africa. Prior to independence there were no national media owners, no national newspapers, television or radio stations, no indigenous corps of trained journalists. Newly independent governments had to work with media which had no African antecedents, even as both political leaders and journalists wrestled with massive debates about capitalism, communism and non-alignment.

It was against this backdrop that I decided to create the first East African media group. I was 24, and had no background – whatsoever – in the media field. In Swahili, I was Kutia Mkono Gizani. Or as we say in English, “the blind leading the blind.”

I am tempted to reminisce at some length about those early days - our big dreams and the steps we took to achieve them. And I would be remiss if I did not take this moment to salute those who have devoted so much time and talent to the progress of the Nation Media Group - in those opening days and ever since.

What did we hope and predict for the Group 50 years ago? We certainly aspired for its transformation from a loss making infant enterprise to a profitable blue chip corporation, and then its transformation from a private venture into a public company - owned principally today by many thousands of local shareholders. We also worked to stay ahead on the technology front, determined not to burden Africa with outmoded production techniques.

What we may not have foreseen, is how the company would diversify and expand - into the whole of East Africa - into television and radio, and now onto the Internet - enabling us to connect our work intimately with the wider world.

But even as we look back with pride, we must also take this occasion to look forward.

As we do, our goal, I submit, should be a future in which Africa will be served by some of the greatest, most respected, media enterprises of the world - an Africa in which both Governments and the media respect and abide by their appropriate roles in your still young democracies.

What should those roles be? This question, too, has been with us from the very start. For we were also aware back then of a critical historical pattern: the fact that, in many places, much of the time, the transmission of news had been the work of advocates - organizations with agendas - political parties, special interest groups and governments.

News media that sought independence, generally speaking, had a difficult life. One of them was the now defunct British newspaper, the *News Chronicle*, edited by the late Michael Curtis, who later played such a central role in the Nation story. With him, we

believed that the tradition of non-aligned newspapers was the most appropriate for Africa. We still believe that today.

It has not always been easy to explain this role - to share our understanding that independence from parties, or interest groups or governments should not and does not mean some sort of reflexive opposition to them. Not having a special agenda does not imply some counter-agenda. Being independent is not the same thing as being oppositional.

Truly independent media cannot be predictably partisan, narrowly politicized, nor superficially personalized. Journalistic shortcomings cannot be disguised behind political or partisan agendas. So the idea of “best practice” became a second NMG goal: to try to identify, educate, and harness the best media talent we could find.

Recent studies from the Freedom House organization report that media freedom is increasingly threatened globally. For every nation that moves forward in terms of press freedom, two nations are said to be slipping backward. Media freedom requires continuing vigilance.

But here let me sound a word of caution. Freedom, in any area of human activity, does not mean the moral license to abuse that freedom. It would be a sad thing if the people of Africa in the name of freedom, were expected to welcome the worst of media practices, whether they are home-grown or imported.

I am convinced that the best way for media, in Africa and elsewhere, to maintain their independence is to prove their indispensability.

This is not an easy task. Information flows more quickly, over longer distances at lower cost than ever before. But sometimes more information – in and of itself - can also mean more misinformation, more confusion, more manipulation, more superficial snapshots of events, lacking nuance, lacking context, or hiding agendas.

We talk a great deal - in Africa in particular - about protecting and improving our natural environment. Similarly, we should be increasingly vigilant about protecting and improving our media environment.

So let us take a closer look at what this could mean in practice for African media.

First, it should be, in my view, more African, taking the lead in addressing Africa - specific concerns intelligently and wisely.

As African media work to sustain African identity and culture, one of the issues we face is language. In Kenya, for example, Swahili readership has been shrinking compared to English readership, while in Tanzania, the opposite is true. How should public policy makers and the communication industry support traditional languages?

On another front, I think we must focus more on questions of media ownership. For as long as I can remember, the quality of African journalists has been topic number one. But I wonder if the principal issue is not rather about the aims and intentions of the owners of communications enterprises. What are their agendas - personal, religious, political, economic?

Crisis management is another issue where the industry must be better prepared. During times of crisis, how do African media leaders respond? We know the challenges - NMG experienced them during the Kenyan crisis two years ago - as did so many others - tribalism, gangsterism, disinformation, corruption and religious intolerance are horrible forces which the media in Africa must sometimes face.

Of course we also have seen - here and elsewhere - courageous, and even heroic, media efforts to respond to these crises and to point the way out. But can African media do more?

When there are strong and legitimate opportunities to give credit for positive African initiatives, is African media paying attention? So many countries where I work, for example, have dysfunctional constitutions - but in many African countries this problem is being wisely addressed. Do we recognize such efforts? In many African places, as well, intelligent regionalism is replacing narrow-minded nationalism, but I wonder if the media gives sufficient credit.

When independence came to most sub-Saharan African countries, nearly all professions were under-developed: law, medicine, education, nursing, public administration .... and

journalism. In some professions remuneration was inadequate to attract the most talented. Today that is improving. In my view the time has come when a sometimes dysfunctional relationship born out of government inexperience or media shallowness can be replaced by a new level of constructive intellectual empathy. I am convinced that an improved relationship is now possible. No! It is essential – if African development is to progress at the pace African peoples need and want.

Spirited debate, intelligent inquiry, informed criticism, principled disagreement - these qualities must continue to characterize a healthy media sector. At the same time, advancing the cause of media responsibility, grounded in professional competence, is nothing less than a moral imperative.

But all of these aspirations must be rooted in better education.

I take up this topic today in my role as Chancellor of the Aga Khan University - an institution which is now 25 years old and based in eight countries, including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the United Kingdom, Syria and Egypt. This University, which originally focused on health sciences and education, is now pursuing a widening array of subjects.

I am pleased to tell you that The Aga Khan University is planning to establish a new Graduate School of Media and Communications, based in East Africa and dedicated to advancing the excellence of media performance and the strengthening of ethical media practices throughout the developing world.

The School will be driven, above all, by an absolute commitment to quality.

It will have several components. It will offer a Masters Degree program, serving recent university graduates as well as media owners, managers, and mid-career journalists. It will also offer continuing education classes - short courses designed to enhance media skills and to nurture media values. It will establish a special program in media management - one of the first in the developing world - devoted to enhancing more robust media institutions. Journalistic independence, after all, depends on financial independence.

In addition, the new School will create a Forum on the Media Future, a place for conducting and disseminating cutting edge research that will help shape public communication in the decades ahead.

In all of these efforts, the School will be driven by an active public service agenda providing a resource for the media community throughout Africa - and in places beyond.

The School's emphasis on the developing world will be reflected in its faculty and student body, as well its curriculum and research pursuits. We foresee, for example, a strong emphasis on using the case study method in our courses, as many law and business schools now do, drawing lessons from concrete historical examples. We intend to develop case studies which grow out of African media experiences, while also reflecting global best practices. These case studies will address recurrent media issues I have mentioned - such as crisis management, trivialization, incompetent analysis, and corruption.

This new School will also work on the cutting edge of media technology, embracing especially the new on-line world - its complications and its potentials. Here, as in other areas, Africa has the capacity to leap-frog into an advanced position in applying these new technologies. The rapid spread here of mobile phone technology supports this view - as do recent advances in broadband availability - including the new SEACOM undersea cable development.

A new campus hosting this program will be developed in Nairobi over the coming year. It will work closely, of course, not only with the Nation Media Group - but also with other local, continental and international media organizations.

Over the longer term, the Graduate School of Media and Communication will ally itself with another new project of the Aga Khan University - a Faculty of Arts and Sciences, to be created over the coming years in Arusha. In a world of growing complexity, journalists must increasingly understand the substantive, sophisticated dimensions of the fields on which they report - from medical and environmental sciences, to economic and financial disciplines, to legal and constitutional matters. And a new generation of African media entrepreneurs could well be born from programs which blend economic and media disciplines.

We hope and trust the new School will contribute to achieving the objectives I have discussed with you today, and I hope these reflections and opportunities of the African media future will be taken into account. May it be a future in which Africa will be served by some of the greatest most respected, media enterprises of the world.

Thank you