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Journalists Go Back To Basics by Leonissah Munjoma



Journalists in a session with Nevanji Madanhire

At least 20 journalists gathered in Harare recently to revisit their professional skills in terms of story writing. The training workshop was held under the HIFC media and mentorship programme. HIFC considers training for journalists an important component of its work. Under the media and mentorship programme, weaknesses in story writing, research and interviewing techniques were observed, forming the basis for the training workshop dubbed “Back to Basics”.

Paidamoyo Chipunza, a participant, summed up the basic nature of the training when she said: “I have learnt that even a single statement from an internet story is considered plagiarism. I have also

learnt that you should choose which of the 5Ws or H to focus on in an intro, thanks to HIFC.”

“The observation was that the journalists seemed to overlook some of the basic story writing skills such as the requirements for an intro, an indication of the need to have a form of refresher course that would touch on the basics of story writing,” said Reyhana Masters, HIFC Coordinator.

She pointed out that another concern was that journalists seemed to spend less time researching the topic they would have chosen to write on even when it was specific.

“They don’t seem to seek updated information and may use background facts or statistics that are outdated. Research will reveal stories that may have already been published and this could provide the opportunity to explore a fresh angle that may not been covered. Research will assist the journalist to write a story in a more in-depth manner and also ensures that formulation of questions is based on knowledge and not a thumb sucking exercise,” she said.

Poor story idea presentation and articulation was another concern that necessitated the holding of the training session. While the journalists are able to generate story ideas, they seemingly face challenges in adequately supporting their ideas with relevant background, justification and identification of potential sources.

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The journalists agreed during the training workshop that there was a tendency to relax and overlook some of the basic elements of story development and writing, particularly writing the intro. The aspect of the 5Ws and an H was usually ignored.

“This was a very useful session. We got basic information which is often overlooked,” said Monica Cheru-Mpambawashe, a participant.

Another participant, Chris Msipa said: “It was a highly refreshing exercise especially for people working outside the newsroom because freelance journalists don’t always get

such training opportunities. And while many of us may think that we are good writers, it was revealed during the workshop that there is a lot we need to work on to improve.”

The training workshop, under the facilitation of a veteran journalist Nevanji Madanhire looked at generating story ideas, identifying sources of information, formulation of questions, the basics of news writing including the structure of a news story and the intro. The role of research in story development was highlighted.

The journalists had an opportunity to discuss new media following a presentation on the

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topic. It was agreed that new media is relevant to Zimbabwe if the country is to “stay with the world and move with it” in terms of globalization. New media, it was observed, had opened new avenues for the public to air their views and put the Zimbabwe story on the global agenda.

The back to basics training workshop was one of a number of workshops HIFC plans to hold during the course of the media grants and mentorship programme. One of the sessions to be held before end of this quarter will focus on humanitarian reporting.

Creating synergies, building bridges by Natasha Msonza



Journalists and HUNGO representatives participate in workshop

Representatives from humanitarian civic society organizations (HUNGOS) and media practitioners recently had the opportunity to explore the creation of synergies between the two sectors for effective dissemination of humanitarian information into the public domain.

In January this year, the Humanitarian Information Facility Centre (HIFC) brought together representatives from humanitarian organizations and media practitioners to start a dialogue on the challenges faced by both sectors in imparting or receiving information. The day-long workshop explored different strategies

- needed to strengthen cooperation between the two sectors. The participants also discussed how HUNGOS could be assisted in packaging and dissemination information and how best to handle the media.

Participants agreed that while most HUNGOS are extremely conversant with critical issues in their line of work, they do not always have the time or ability to package that information. Often that critical information has no means of making its way into the public domain for dissemination to a wider audience - namely stakeholders and policy makers. In other cases, non-governmental organizations have had bad experiences with the media and are generally untrusting of the latter.

By bringing the two groups together, these and other existing issues were interrogated and attempts were made to see how they

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Creating synergies, building bridges

could be resolved in order to build a symbiotic relationship based on trust and integrity.

The workshop was facilitated by Cris Chinaka, Reuters Chief Correspondent who brought his wide and varied experience to the drawing board. Vincent Kahiya, then editor of The Zimbabwe Independent, was invited to take a session during which he analyzed the current working relationship between HUNGOS and the media and how this relationship could be improved.

The workshop-shared principles of humanitarian information exchange to encourage and enable information managers to share, manage and disseminate the vast amounts of information and data that can generate during emergencies or is encountered during humanitarian assistance efforts.

Among the valuable lessons shared, participants learnt a number of techniques for handling the media, among which they were encouraged to keep themselves well-versed on how newsrooms operate, media organization deadlines and the right people to whom to send press releases and invitations.

“Keeping lines of communication open with journalists, making regular drop-ins and phone calls are useful public relations techniques”

Keeping lines of communication open with journalists by making regular drop-ins or phone calls was another useful public relations technique shared with participants. Journalists were encouraged to follow organiza-

tional protocols whenever they want official opinions and to take care not to misrepresent them as this is what generally makes HUNGOS hesitant to talk to the media.

“Timely availability of humanitarian information is essential in making relief efforts more effective”

HIFC recognizes the importance of accurate and timely humanitarian information in making relief efforts more effective and currently works with a network of trusted and mentored journalists committed to reporting accurate, evidence based and depoliticized news on the



Workshop participants in group work

humanitarian issues affecting different sections of the nation.

The workshop encouraged humanitarian organizations to make use of the available network of mentored journalists who are often in a position to go out into the field and get the story.

While upholding the principle of ethics, journalists going out into the field are encouraged to stick to the facts as much as possible and also carry out extensive interviews with the right sources.

Building firm foundations to influence policymakers by Natasha Msonza



ABA members sit through a session on the legal framework

Living in a makeshift plastic shack and eking out a living as a vendor are just some of the issues for members of the Alternative Business Association (ABA) – a grassroots organization representing the needs and interests of small business holders in Zimbabwe.

Constant harassment by officials and lack of understanding of the legislative and policy framework governing their activities add to the list of the other issues.

Realizing the need to identify and communicate these issues to policymakers via the media prompted the Coordinator for ABA, Mr Israel Mabhoo, to contact the Humanitarian Information Facility Centre (HIFC) and request training.

Having been impressed by a HIFC information strategies workshop he had attended and familiarizing himself with the work being undertaken by the organization, Mr Mabhoo wrote to request training for the organization's members and animators - provincial and district level focal persons coordinating small business holder activities.

Mr Mabhoo felt that the animators – who are more in touch with the issues on the ground - should be in a position to package and logically put across their grievances in a format stakeholders could empathize with and the media would find interesting and appealing.

Members of ABA are often confronted with policy impediments and other challenges that subtract from their efforts in trying to make a livelihood. Their challenges have continued to escalate as economy continues to decline, conditions get tougher and the unemployment rate increases.

The majority of the ABA members are victims of Operation Murambatsvina, and they never recovered the losses they experienced during that period of destruction of property.

The workshop design sought to unpack and establish what the real issues were for this community as opposed to perceived obstacles.

It also unpacked the legal framework governing their operations so that they would be in a position to argue their case from an informed position of what the law says on each of their operations.

Participants were equipped with knowledge of the legal framework governing their operations and explored ways of formulating discourse with the city council towards a working relationship.

Lobby and advocacy techniques were also imparted to the membership whose short term plans involve engaging policy makers. The association will send regular updates to HIFC that may be useful to the network of mentored journalists working with the latter.

Upcoming Events

- Introduction to Humanitarian reporting— March 05, 2010—St Lucia Park.
- World Press Freedom May 3 activities— HIFC is planning a workshop with journalists and a roundtable with editors

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