

# The diaspora to the

**The Post's collaboration between the hard copy as content provider and its US-based site owners as administrator, demonstrates an alternative (even if unconventional) model of publishing online.**

by Lilian Ndamang

Despite the proliferation of African newspapers online, many newsrooms around the continent still grapple with some difficult questions: How does a newspaper with no access to a computer linked to a modem create and maintain a website? Why and how do you start publishing online when the print run of your hard copy ranges between 3 000 and 4 000, and your target audience is an urban-based, literate minority? In fact, why bother with online publishing in a country where computer ownership is very low and few people have regular access to the Internet?

Enthusiastic about going online, yet challenged by these questions, Cameroon's *The Post* – a private bi-weekly, English-language newspaper with a print run of 4 000, found one answer: the Cameroonian Diaspora.

Says Charlie Ndi Chia, editor-in-chief: "All along we knew about the necessity of going online. But, somehow, we were criminally reluctant. We were dragging our feet. We got accosted by Cameroonians especially those of them in the diaspora. They were asking 'every now and again, we get to pick up one copy of *The Post* or the other. Why don't you go online so that we can, through you, know what is happening back home. Somewhere along the line some Samaritans came to the rescue and set up this website for us. I think before they did it, we set up one which failed. Somewhere along the line these guys came and we had free lunch more or less."

*The Post* has a staff of 20 and 18 stringers around the country. Its head office in Buea is equipped with four computers which are not connected to the Internet: two in the production room, and one each in the newsroom and the managing editor's office. However, the newspaper shares its offices with a cyber café and this enables staff to access the Internet frequently.

The paper's first venture into online publishing with [www.thepostnewspaper.org](http://www.thepostnewspaper.org) in early 2004 was short-lived. The site hosted by a Paris-based Internet service provider was designed and edited by Clovis Atatah, a staff reporter with basic skills in website design and based in Yaounde, the nation's capital. Design flaws such as inconsistent colour and navigational schemes, the use of large graphic files that took long to load, a lack of consistency between pages, and a poor mixture of graphics and text, as well as the difficulty of coordinating between the newspaper's head office and the web editor in Yaounde, meant the site was updated irregularly. As a result, the site closed down. However, in its short lifespan, it had developed a loyal audience among Anglophone Cameroonian emigrants.

## Enter the diasporans

Later in 2004, two US-based Cameroonians in the process of creating a multimedia and publishing company for Cameroonian artists and authors who have little or no opportunity to expose their works to a global audience, came to the rescue. Dibussi Tande, who with Emil Mondofo founded Jimbi Media, says: "We realised that we could use weblog technology to quickly create websites that could easily be updated even by people with absolutely



no knowledge of web design. We therefore decided that the first phase of the project would be the creation of professionally designed weblogs for selected members of our target audience. Since we happen to be news junkies and were thoroughly disappointed with the initial *Post* website, our first target was *The Post*."

After contacting the paper with their proposal, [www.postnewsline.com](http://www.postnewsline.com) was launched in August 2004 as 'an interactive feature of *The Post* newspaper' with Chicago-based information systems analyst Tande and Delaware-based medical doctor Mondofo serving as site administrator and designer respectively.

The website uses TypePad – a technically unsophisticated weblog software that facilitates interactivity between the site and its users. The simplicity of the software means anyone with basic computer literacy skills can use it. Thus, staff at the paper are able to load content on the site easily.

The result is a relationship of mutual dependency where the newspaper benefits from the expertise of its audience to maintain an online presence, while the ready availability of news online ensures that the diasporic audience has frequent access to news from home. Indeed, a visitor locator map introduced on the [www.postnewsline.com](http://www.postnewsline.com) in January 2006 to track and cluster its users' geographic location based on ISP addresses, points to a significantly large amount of traffic from North America, Europe

and Asia.

Further examination of aspects of this model of online publishing illustrates how the decision to go online, and the online target audience, are respectively transforming the news production process and the organisation of the newsroom.

## Organisation

The website functions through a co-ordination between the newspaper's website co-ordinator (a staff reporter) in Cameroon and the website owners in the US. The website co-ordinator uploads stories on the website the evening the paper goes to print or on the morning the paper is available on newsstands. Once news stories are loaded they are ready for public consumption. Despite the six- to seven-hour time differences between Cameroon and the US, the site's Chicago-based owner accesses the site almost daily to "perform routine administrative, technical and other tasks" such as rearranging pictures, checking layouts on stories and updating the site with other relevant stories culled from the Internet. Significant news events are sometimes published and updated online before the print edition. For example, the strike by students at the University of Buea (April/May 2005), the death of a prominent Anglophone politician and human rights activist, Albert Mukong (August 2004), the collapse of the Mungo Bridge (August 2004) and the cabinet reshuffle of December 2004. Having an online

# rescue

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Cameroon, we realised that such long silence had the potential of creating a disgruntled readership in the long run. So we did what we could during that period to post relevant Cameroonian stories from news agencies such as AFP and Reuters, including a special report on corruption at the Douala Port which originated on Camnet.”

## Gatekeeping and the use of feedback

Targeting the Cameroonian diasporic audience has introduced an additional level of gatekeeping at the newspaper. Stories for the paper’s website are specifically selected for their quality and edited before being loaded on the site. “We do the normal edition and then we pick up strong, relevant information – relevant to the taste of our online audience – and reduce it to the stories. It is the same menu. The only thing that we might do slightly is to clean up, the sheet, as it were from the typos,” says editor-in-chief Ndi Chia.

Like most weblogs, a comments section accompanies each story on [www.postnewsline.com](http://www.postnewsline.com). Readers’ comments are valued by the newspaper and are frequently published in the hard copy even though letters sent to the hard copy are not featured on the website. However, the use of anonymity by most users of the website and the inability to monitor comments before they appear on the site (ie: in a similar way in which ‘letters to the editor’ are edited before appearing in the hard copy of the newspaper), presents a challenge to the current model. During the 2005 university student strike, *The Post’s* coverage elicited an unusually high amount of feedback from its online readers. The US-based administrators temporarily suspended the comments feature after the volume of comments and the increasing resort to personal attacks and insults by some users overwhelmed it. The feature was subsequently restored with additional security measures requiring readers to register through an online authentication service before posting comments.

## Advertising revenue

The site owners introduced advertising in October 2004. The advertisements dominantly target a North American-based readership. Products advertised range from phone cards to diet pills and include American service companies. In addition, readers are encouraged to make voluntary contributions to sustain the site. The newspaper’s own attempt to generate income through advertising has so far been unsuccessful owing to inadequate expertise in advertising sales and the absence of credit business in the country. Given the target audience of the online edition, Ndi Chia concludes that “the volume of advertisement on that site is very likely for a long time to be dependent on the diaspora, ie: foreign advertisers. Cameroonian advertisers? I do not know how many people in this country go on that website”.

## Diaspora and the digital divide

Anthony Olorunnisola has proposed that African media and content providers can enhance their presence online by targeting a ready audience of African emigrant communities in the diaspora. Considering the growing size of the African diaspora in North America and Europe, Olorunnisola’s proposal

seems reasonable. The number of Africans who emigrated from the continent increased dramatically in the 1990s. In 2000, the US Census Bureau’s statistics on the country’s foreign-born population indicated that there were close to one million African immigrants in the United States. More than half of these arrived between 1990 and 2000.

To meet their various information needs, diasporic communities have operated small newspapers, magazines and broadcast media. Internet radio stations such as [www.radiopalmwine.com](http://www.radiopalmwine.com) and the UK-licensed [www.voiceofafricanradio.com](http://www.voiceofafricanradio.com) provide news and entertainment to African diasporic communities in the US and UK respectively. Besides, the ready access to personal computers and connection to the Internet among migrant communities has facilitated the establishment of what researchers describe as “virtual national communities” and “on-line social networks” within the African diaspora. Listservs, and electronic discussions groups such as *Naijanet* (Nigerians) *Naijapolitics* (Nigerians) *Camnetwork* (Cameroonians), *AfricaPolitics* (Africans in general) and other interactive websites, serve as a means of engaging with compatriots living in the same country or elsewhere.

*The Post’s* collaboration between the hard copy as content provider and its US-based site owners as administrator, demonstrates an alternative (even if unconventional) model of publishing online. It simultaneously illustrates how the skills of the Cameroonian diasporic community are being appropriated towards the homeland particularly in the face of poor infrastructure and a lack of skills in website development. Certainly, the constitution of the Digital Diaspora Network for Africa (DDN-A) during the WSIS process as a platform to mobilise the African diaspora’s technological, entrepreneurial and professional expertise and resources in bridging the digital divide epitomises recognition for this form of engagement between the African diasporic community and the homeland. ■

presence has also enhanced the paper’s visibility through news exchange and distribution mechanisms such as [allafrica.com](http://allafrica.com).

## Editorial decision making

The hardcopy of the paper remains the focus of editorial decisions. However, with the website managed externally, lines of authority in the editorial decision-making process can easily become blurred: “Being print media guys who are working for a bi-weekly paper, *The Post* team is having a hard time grasping the concept of real time news. Thus, even when a major event (eg a cabinet reshuffle) happens a day or two before the print issue comes out, they sit on that story until after the print issue hits the street, before updating the site. In such situations, therefore, Dr Mondoia or I usually update the site with the breaking news in real time,” says Tande.

In January 2005 one of the site’s owners uploaded a story on the website which had not been commissioned or written by anyone at *The Post*. Two stories (one with no byline and another with the author’s name withheld) on corruption at the Douala seaport were loaded on the site – an action which was explained by Tande as follows: “In December/January, 2004/5, the entire *Post* staff took its end-of-year vacation and the site was not updated from Cameroon for about five weeks. While it was not obvious to the team back in

## References

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