

P O R

T R A

I T S

**30 journalists
from all over
the world tell
their story**

**P O R
T R A
I T S**

**30 journalists
from all over
the world tell
their story**

For over 10 years, French media development agency CFI has teamed important media stakeholders to work together on jointly-crafted projects. Every year, our staff have supported nearly 6,000 of these stakeholders, working in Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa, in the Middle East, Asia and the Balkans. Journalists working in conventional media outlets such as the press, radio and television, and in online media born of citizens' initiatives, are all dedicated to providing accurate, reliable, independent news. This collection of portraits profiles 30 journalists having benefited from CFI support in the past years. We recount their personal and professional journeys, how they came to their vocation, their commitments, struggles and hopes. But this is not just a set of stories of fascinating individuals: it is a tribute to the community of beneficiaries as a whole, honouring all media players worldwide, with whom our staff work on a daily basis. They are an immense source of pride and inspiration for the agency.



01 Dorra Ben Abdelkader, p. 8
 02 Wedad Albadwi, p. 12
 03 Carole Ambassa, p. 16
 04 Virginie Améké, p. 20
 05 Ahmed Baider, p. 24

06 Gaston Bonheur Sawadogo, p. 28
 07 Lina Chawaf, p. 32
 08 Mohamed Taieb Chmengui p. 36
 09 Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne, p. 40
 10 Moussa Diallo, p. 44

11 Amélie Gue, p. 48
 12 Latifa Salissou Hassane, p. 52
 13 Lo'ai Hazem, p. 56
 14 Abdoul-Razak Idrissa, p. 60
 15 Solange Shagayo Kagombe, p. 64

16 Tatiana Kozak, p. 68
 17 Soklim Ky, p. 72
 18 Ramatou Baoua N'gobi, p. 76
 19 Hoàng Nhật Nguyễn, p. 80
 20 Heba Obeidat, p. 84

21 Saychai Phanthavong, p. 88
 22 Zeina Ramadan, p. 92
 23 Felana Carol Rajaonarivelo, p. 96
 24 Tenin Samake, p. 100
 25 Sokcheng Seang, p. 104

26 Bounheng Southishak, p. 108
 27 Falilatou Titi, p. 112
 28 Olesia Tytarenko, p. 116
 29 Amadou Wangre, p. 120
 30 Rachid Assade Zongo, p. 124



01

Dorra Ben Abdelkader

INVESTIGATING TO "REVEAL THE SYSTEM'S FLAWS"

Dorra Ben Abdelkader has been a journalist for over twenty years. She has devoted her career to advancing Tunisian society, focusing on human rights and environmental issues.

Dorra Ben Abdelkader grew up in a simple family in Tunis. Her civil servant father and stay-at-home mother unwittingly imparted a taste for the media and current affairs to her. She recalled: “I remember when I was little, we always had newspapers at home; and I really enjoyed browsing through them. Come to think of it, maybe that’s where my taste for the media was born.” After secondary school, she naturally studied journalism, earning a Master in Communication Sciences and Corporate Communication from the Press and Information Science Institute (IPSI) in Tunis. “I was admitted to the first journalism class at the university, in 1996. I was attracted to journalism because it appealed to my love of literature as well as satisfying my interest in general culture,” Dorra explained.

EARLY CAREER AND INVESTIGATION

Shortly after graduating from university, she was recruited to the agency Tunis Afrique Presse, where she started out on her career as a journalist. “I did a tour of all desks in the newsroom, as they say in the business, working in the international, regional and political sections. This was an enriching experience, since I dealt with a variety of subjects and grasped a better understanding of what I liked.” Twenty years later, she became deputy Chief Editor of the society section, covering topics related to education, health and the protection of human rights. In this role, she discovered her appetite for investigative work: “I like to expose flaws in the system, show what hinders the proper application of laws or reveal a loophole that prevents society from functioning properly.” Her mission has been all the more important since the revolution of 2011, and the subsequent relaxing of censorship in Tunisian society. “The revolution has given us more freedom to express ourselves. As a journalist and citizen, I owe it to myself to help improve the general climate by trying to solve society’s problems.”

MÉDIALAB INVESTIGATION

To fulfil this ambition, she applied to participate in MédiaLab Investigation, a CFI project that has supported investigative work in the Arab world since 2019. This project is necessary in a region where journalists often lack the funds to tackle complex subjects over the long term. She has especially investigated the use of pesticides in Tunisian agriculture: “I needed to analyse certain agricultural produce to find out their pesticide levels. With this financial support, I was able to carry out these analyses and travel further afield to gather testimonies from people living far from the city.” It also helped with an investigation into a detention centre for undocumented migrants in Tunisia: “I am very proud of this investigation, because I was the first journalist to knock on the door of this centre and show what was happening there.” Recently, she completed a dossier on psychological violence against women. This topic is

seldom discussed in the country, despite the government adopting Act 58, in 2017, to curb violence against women. “While there is now a law to protect us from violence, no procedures have been implemented to enforce it. For example, for acts of physical violence, a certificate can be drawn up with a lawyer in order to specify the damage, but there is no equivalent for psychological abuse, except when it has become too severe. This causes great damage to the lives of women.” And yet, psychological abuse affects all social and professional categories, with emergency rates increasing during the coronavirus lockdown. “A lot of women are subjected to psychological abuse, although only a few dare to speak out. Many are afraid that they won’t be taken seriously, given that their pain is often invisible. The phenomenon affects all social circles. Sometimes, well-educated women in senior positions are scared to acknowledge the harassment they suffer at home because they believe they will be judged, to the detriment of their career.” Dorra Abdelkader wants to continue to fight this scourge, in order to improve women’s mental health. It is also a way of getting closer to another of her vocations, having toyed with the idea of becoming a psychologist if she had not chosen to embark on a career as a journalist: “I really believe that listening to people can save lives.”

“I like to expose flaws in the system, show what hinders the proper application of laws or reveal a loophole that prevents society from functioning properly.”



02

Wedad Albadwi

FOUNDER OF THE CULTURAL
MEDIA CENTRE IN SANA'A

Education and culture are core features of developed society. Journalist Wedad Albadwi is well aware of this, which is why she set up CMC, the Cultural Media Centre in Sana'a in Yemen, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Wedad Albadwi was born in Taiz, a city on the high plateaux in the south-west of Yemen. Against her parents' advice, she left her hometown to study journalism in Sana'a. They would round to her decision later, once they realised that she would not resign herself to changing her mind.

COMMITTED TO THE CAUSE OF WOMEN IN YEMEN

For Wedad, journalism is first and foremost a means of speaking up for those who don't have a voice. "I saw journalism as a platform not only for making my own voice heard but especially the voices of others. I wanted to have the power to influence decision-makers by telling the stories I heard around me and raising awareness of the social problems faced by women I knew who shared their suffering with me." Very early on in her career, she began specialising in human rights issues and the role of women. In particular, she works as an investigator on the ground for local NGOs committed to women's rights. It is a necessary task in Yemen, the worst-ranked country for the last 13 years on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (according to an Amnesty International report). Women there are the victims of deeply-rooted inequality, given the patriarchal nature of Yemeni society. The situation has been aggravated by the economic crisis caused by the war, making Yemeni women even more vulnerable to all forms of violence.

Wedad decided to found a cultural centre with some friends in order to take her vision further. And so the CMC (Cultural Media Centre) came into being in 2011, amid the Arab Spring protests: "We wanted to create a cultural platform that could change people's attitudes towards various issues in Yemen but also improve the standard of education in the country."

FOUNDER OF A CENTRE FOR CULTURE AND THE MEDIA

Together, the members of a collective began organising cultural events such as plays, but also introduced training for young journalists. The new organisation regarded this set of initiatives as a means of supporting local development: "We really wanted to address matters of social injustice and human rights by way of simple actions that could have an impact on many people." In just a few years, the CMC has managed to build a network of female journalists throughout the country, as well as a cultural observatory for keeping information on all activities within the country up to date.

At the same time, Wedad is actively involved in developing humanitarian journalism. She has for example taken part in YMER+ project training sessions run by CFI. Wedad is also involved in Makanati (meaning "my place" in Arabic), a project to boost women's participation in Iraqi and Yemeni society, and raise awareness of their concerns among the general public.

STRIVING FOR PEACE AND EQUALITY

Funded by national and international organisations such as Internews and the Yemeni Ministry of Culture, the CMC now has seven permanent and two part-time employees, along with a number of volunteers. The team is fully focussed on defending human rights, despite a tough political scene. Wedad declared her stance: "Since the onset of civil war, the whole country has been divided between two governments in the north and south, making the situation very complicated, as aid workers and journalists working for either camp are often threatened or killed. Our role is to help them, regardless of their political opinions or activities."

That's a tough task in Yemen, where freedom of expression is on shaky ground. Since 2015, some 15 journalists have been taken hostage by armed groups, such as Houthi rebels and Al-Qaeda, and the working conditions for reporters are such that many have opted to give up and retrain (according to a Reporters Without Borders report). But Wedad is not giving up and fully intends to overcome the obstacles ahead of her, as she organises training for young women who want to become journalists. "As a woman, you have to clear many obstacles to live in Yemen. You're not free to dress as you please or go where you will. Nowadays, being in a public place with men is tricky in Sana'a, which is why it's important not to give up on education for young women and future journalists." It's a battle she continues to fight as she waits for a return to peace and stability in her country. She sees it as her only hope for the future: "In times of war, personal and political become increasingly interconnected. Without peace, planning and dreaming of the future is simply impossible, whether from a personal or professional perspective."

**“As a woman,
you have to clear many
obstacles to live in Yemen.”**



03

Carole Ambassa

IN SUPPORT OF HEALTH AND NATURE

At the age of 30, Cameroonian Carole Ambassa chose scientific journalism, for its close connection with the day-to-day health and environmental concerns of her fellow citizens. Her aim was to provide them with solutions rather than merely report the issues.

Even as a teenager, Carole Ambassa loved to write. “I wanted to be a writer. At secondary school, I wrote poems and a short story. I had this ability to write, but then in college, something clicked. I needed more, I wanted to become a journalist,” she recalled. She was later to become Chief Editor of the Cameroonian newspaper Échos Santé. The 30-year-old is now Chief Editor of Afrik Environnement, which belongs to the same press group. Getting there has been anything but a walk in the park: “My dad had been a journalist and did not think I should follow in his footsteps. He was convinced I would end up unemployed.” Carole did initially thus turn her back on her calling and instead studied English, since she was from one of the country’s two English-speaking regions, the south-west of Cameroon. Then, with the support of her older brothers, she managed to win over her father, completed a professional degree in Information and Communication Sciences at the Siantou University Institute in Yaoundé and ended up, almost accidentally, specialising in health. “The subject arose when my mum had to have three operations on the same leg. I thought to myself, why not use my professional research skills to access medical information?” she recalled.

A DEDICATED JOURNALIST

With the gift of hindsight, having worked for the Échos Santé newspaper since its creation in 2016, she does not regret her choice: “Scientific journalism is closely linked to solutions journalism. We don’t simply relay information and report problems.” And its social value has become even clearer in the light of the current health situation. “At first, some people in Cameroon thought Covid-19 was ‘a hoax’. We had to work really hard to raise awareness and inform people, because few journalists were working on the ground at the time for fear of infection. But the Ministry of Health followed our advice and opened its doors to reporters and citizens, answering their questions directly on Twitter.” In a country where journalists are often criticised for cosyng up to political and economic powers, Carole Ambassa is convinced of the value of modern tools for social interaction: “In 2017 and 2018, I took two CFI training courses in Senegal (Editor’s note: the Media 360° projects) on journalism, production and moderation on social media. They showed these networks in a new light, as an opportunity for me.” As a result, the Échos Santé website now has 150,000 visitors and its Facebook page about 2,500 followers.

In June 2020, Carole left her role as Chief Editor of Échos Santé to take up the same position at Afrik Environnement, a newspaper dedicated to the environment, renewable energy and the Sustainable Development Goals, belonging to the same press group. Désiré Effala, Deputy Managing Director of the group, told us that “Carole is weathering the challenges of the job well.

Given her experience, she can put the environment on the agenda.” Carole further explained: “In Cameroon, the environment is a strategic sector that has had little coverage up to now. I’d like to stand out from the crowd. I want people to remember me as a dedicated journalist.” It’s just one more battle for the scientific reporter, who already works as Communications Officer for two NGOs: Triso-cœur, which supports children with Down’s syndrome and Jeunesse Sans Stupéfiants for young drug addicts.

IN TEN YEARS’S TIME

“My mum tells me that I always find ways to solve my own problems. But I want to find solutions for everyone’s problems!” she concluded. As Communications Officer at the Triso-cœur and Jeunesse Sans Stupéfiants organisations, she hopes that the next 10 years will bring progress in education for children with Down’s syndrome in Cameroon. She would also like to promote entrepreneurship among young people to prevent them falling victim to drugs. But there is no question of her “removing her journalist’s hat”. Désiré Effala seems, more or less, to have come to accept the fact that, at some point, she will see this valued employee leave: “Carole is a hard worker. In ten years’s time, she will have grown and may well leave to join another media outlet to take her career further.” Her brother-in-law, Kouao N’tamon Samson, thinks she would do well to become an investigative journalist, as she is already required to head off in search of information on health and environment. Gilles Tientcheu, a friend of Carole Ambassa since 2011, confirmed this: “She is determined and knows how to harry people! When she needs information, she won’t leave me alone all day, but it’s this drive that propels her projects forward!” In ten years’s time, he would like to see his friend earning a salary on a par with her skills, in a position with responsibilities in television or radio.

“Scientific journalism is closely linked to solutions journalism. We don’t simply relay information and report problems.”

Virginie Améké

A STRICT YET CARING MOTHER FIGURE
FOR JOURNALISTS

Virginie Améké, 60, is the Director of the Communications Training and Retraining Centre (CFRC) in Togo. While she takes great care of her team and journalists in training, she also expects nothing less than excellence.



“It’s a real pleasure to talk to you!” Our interview begins with a welcoming, almost motherly, compliment for a stranger followed by a spontaneous peal of almost child-like laughter. Virginie Améké, the current Director of the Centre for Training and Retraining in Communication (CFRC) in Togo, used to read books as a way to travel to new places: “I had never really considered journalism. But I loved reading, to find out what was going on elsewhere.” Nowadays, her studies to Master level in administration, with a specialisation in documentary policy, have led to her travelling for real to attend training courses, in France and elsewhere. However, Virginie chose to put her knowledge to good use back in Togo. First appointed to the Directorate of Financial and Administrative Affairs of the Culture Department at the Ministry of Culture in 2011, she went on to head up the CFRC in 2014. She started out by taking stock, applying her sense of rigour and uncompromising approach. “Some called themselves journalists, even though they had no training apart from a few years at university. They had ended up here and were winging it. There was work to do!”

“LIKE A FAMILY”

If you think that having reached the age of 60, with her qualifications and impressive career in senior management, Virginie Améké would be contemptuous of the “little” journalists, you couldn’t be more wrong! “Thanks to CFI and its Togo Media project, I might have learned more about journalism than anybody else since 2018! I had to work really hard to reach the same level as the journalists!” Journalist and trainer Sophie Ekoué can vouch for that: “During the Train the Trainer sessions, Virginie took copious notes, filling out many notebooks every day. Now, she no longer accepts any old training project concocted by ‘high-ranking journalists’. She expects projects to be well-written, with precise outcomes and deliverables.” She might be a stickler, but Virginie Améké is also caring. Sophie Ekoué points out that “everyone calls her ‘Mum’! During training sessions, she even serves the attendees breakfast!” After taking off her mask, the cheerful Virginie starts to chuckle again: “There are two sides to me: a stern, imposing director, and a maternal figure. I like to instil confidence in people, empowering them to realise their potential and achieve what I expect of them.” Her own daughter, Mirinda-Marc Port, née Améké, is not really jealous: “Mum thinks of her colleagues as a family. It’s in her nature as a leader to enjoy watching people grow.”

Just a few months away from retirement, Virginie Améké is pleased with the progress her team has made: “The 10 CFRC members have made great strides forward in the way they organise training, welcome and monitor the journalists undertaking the training, as if they were part of our family. We won’t abandon them! And they regularly come back to report on their achievements as trainers.

Further to their training, some have even been applauded by their students!” As a demanding mother with a large family, Virginie Améké now wants to take other “children” under her wing, training technicians and journalists from central Togo.

IN TEN YEARS’S TIME

A return to her roots, or rather to books and young people. Several people see Virginie Améké surrounded by children and books in her retirement. “I would like to give Togolese toddlers a chance to enjoy books from the earliest of ages, so they can get a taste for them.” However, having learned so much about the media, the CFRC Director isn’t ruling out the possibility of remaining involved with media in some capacity. “Perhaps by offering programmes on culture and reading, or writing a training book on journalism,” she mused. Ever the optimist, she imagines a future for Togo with well-structured media outlets and well-trained journalists with press passes. Virginie paused when circling back to talk about herself: “I need a bit of downtime and yet the “mum” in me will need to stay active, for the sake of the youngsters! I would like to provide street children with a meal a day and make them feel like they haven’t been left behind, so that they can realise how valuable they are.”

“I had never really considered journalism. But I loved reading, to find out what was going on elsewhere.”



05

Ahmed Baider

DEFENDING NEUTRALITY IN JOURNALISM IN YEMEN

CFI's local coordinator in Yemen, Ahmed Baider, doubles up as a journalist and producer, making award-winning reports on the lives of his fellow citizens during the war.

Ahmed Baider worked in the tourist industry for a long time before becoming a journalist. Before the Arab Spring protests broke out in 2011, he ran his family business, a tour company in Aden. He shared his love of Yemen with tourists and travellers, providing nature excursions and walks in old Sana'a. Politics had other plans. When the Arab uprisings began, tourists gradually left the country and there were only a few foreign journalists left. He explained: “There were no more tourists; I had to do something else. As a tour guide, I had established a lot of contacts with foreign travellers and reporters. They often asked me to provide translation services, to help them with visas and I realised that there was a real need for this.” He then became a mediator responsible for liaising between foreign correspondents and the Yemeni authorities.

FROM TOURISM TO MEDIA

As civil war broke out in Yemen, in 2014, plunging the population into misery and hunger, Ahmed set about establishing the necessary logistical and security conditions for foreign media outlets such as the BBC, The Guardian and Arte to be able to report on the ground: “My role very quickly went beyond logistics. I would investigate the stories that the reporters wanted to tell, to pinpoint their needs and to put them in touch with the relevant contacts or sometimes even certain militias.”

He then became a journalist and producer and even received an Emmy award, a prestigious American award for the best TV professionals, as well as the AIBs TV award for his work with BBC News on Taiz, the “city of snipers”. He told us that “I like human stories that show duality. I believe in intimate stories and, as a producer, I want to report on what happened to my people during the war.”

TRAINING LOCAL JOURNALISTS...

In 2017, Ahmed was appointed Local CFI Coordinator for a conference in Amman, bringing together 25 Yemeni reporters from the two conflict areas. “The problem with journalists in Yemen is that they are often biased due to the political nature of the country at present. Many complain that they are threatened when they publish certain articles because they do not toe the editorial line of the media outlet they write for. The aim of this event was to listen to their needs so that they can do their job properly,” he explained. Ahmed also works on the Yemeni Media Emergency Response project (YMER), which aims to train local professionals in humanitarian journalism. Some hundred Yemenis are benefiting from the project, learning the basics of narration and reporting in a humanitarian crisis situation. “Yemen has the worst humanitarian situation in the world. It was important for them to learn how to write a story and to report the situation on the ground correctly by communicating accurate information to the people,” explained Ahmed. This project entered

its second phase in 2020 with the launch of Sawtinsaana (the voice of humans in Arabic), a Facebook platform where journalists can post articles and videos covering the situation on the ground. Ahmed added: “I want to support free, impartial journalism. With Sawtinsaana, we have managed to create a network of journalists who can share human-interest stories without any kind of political affiliation.”

...TO ENSURE IMPARTIAL, HUMANITARIAN JOURNALISM

This is an essential mission in Yemen, where freedom of the press is under serious threat. “My greatest pride is the newsroom we set up for the 2018 Yemen peace conference in Sweden. Whenever this kind of discussion took place, no one in Yemen knew what was going on inside and often the journalists covering the story were affiliated with a political party or one side of the conflict. This newsroom brought together journalists from all countries, who could interview representatives of civil society and opposing delegations,” he said proudly. And the operation was a success, as all the local media outlets in the country picked up the information and shared it on social media.

While Ahmed Baider enjoys his new job as a journalist, he still hopes to return to his first love of tourism one day: “Yemen is a very beautiful country. As opposed to what one might think, there is not only the desert, there are also mountains, valleys and a beautiful coastline, and Sana'a is one of the most beautiful and ancient cities in the world. So, obviously, I would rather show you around my country than share terrible stories with you”, he concluded.

“My greatest pride is the newsroom we set up for the 2018 Yemen peace conference in Sweden.



06

Gaston Bonheur Sawadogo

PUTTING THE PEN IN THE WOUND
AND CARING FOR OTHERS

In Burkina Faso, the “Land of Upright Men”, Gaston Bonheur Sawadogo, 35, follows in the footsteps of the famous investigative journalist Norbert Zongo. Uncompromising on the truth and citizens’ rights, the Chief Editor of the newspaper L’Événement also likes to offer solutions.

Is Gaston Bonheur Sawadogo a misleading name? “Gaston gives a first impression of being withdrawn, but he is very sociable, committed to the truth and to changing society in Burkina,” enthused Arnaud Ouédraogo, Coordinator at the Norbert Zongo unit for investigative journalism in West Africa (CENOZO). Aged 35, the current Chief Editor of the investigative newspaper L’Événement stands by the Albert Londres quote “Our job is to put the pen to the wound”, confirming that: “I write to raise ethical standards in public life and demand that human rights be respected. Gaston Bonheur is my pen name because in my investigations, I am also interested in covering the solutions needed.”

Gaston Sawadogo was always meticulous, even as a child: “My father kept telling me that without a love for work, you can’t succeed.” Even at primary school, young Gaston understood and applied the lesson. “In Year 4, he represented our school in the Excellence Awards. And when out hunting, if we hadn’t caught a hare, or even a gecko, Gaston would push us to go that little bit further to succeed.” recalled his cousin and friend, Constantin Sawadogo. Studious and determined, Gaston Bonheur Sawadogo was already making notes about something other than his lessons in his little exercise books: “I used to read and copy out articles by Norbert Zongo (Editor’s note: journalist assassinated in 1998) without necessarily understanding them. Like him, I wanted to speak out against injustice.” Gaston started carrying out investigations for La Torche, the newspaper of his provincial secondary school in Kongoussi (in north-western Burkina Faso). One of his articles covered the embezzlement of money for pupils’ textbooks.

“MAKING THE FIGURES SPEAK”

At the University of Ouagadougou, Gaston Bonheur Sawadogo first earned a 4-year degree, with journalism as an optional extra, then a Master in information and communication sciences. With a passion for investigation, he did his first internship in 2013 at the newspaper L’Événement. In 2018, he became Company Secretary of the newspaper, then Chief Editor a year later. Mariam Sagnon, a journalist from L’Événement, gratefully recounted: “He tells me off a lot, but I’ve really learned a lot from him. He tells me to always do all I can, to do the best I can and to defend my ideas, even when I’m in a minority.” But the Chief Editor is not one to rest on his laurels. “He always keeps abreast of innovations in the profession. He does not like someone bringing something he is ignorant of to the newsroom,” observes Raphaël Aspavati, Company Secretary of the same newspaper. Éric Le Braz, journalist coach for CFI, is also impressed: “The expression ‘Land of Upright Men’ always reminds me of Gaston because he is reliable, tenacious and a meticulous investigator. And, as a coach in areas as technical as data journalism, he is patient and never raises his voice.” The same thirst for learning seems to motivate the little schoolboy turned coach:

“Thanks to CFI, I discovered data journalism in 2015. It is wonderful when you can coax figures into elucidating, illustrating and telling a story. I was also able to consolidate my skills in editorial management and investigation via CFI’s Faso Media project. Lastly, I learned about solution-based journalism, sharing best practices and giving people hope.” Gaston Bonheur Sawadogo is a journalist coach who is visibly happy to share his knowledge, via CFI’s Open Government Project in French-speaking Africa (PAGOF) and Vérifox projects, for example: “I learn from other people’s experience and working methods, including new fact-checking tools, to get citizens involved.”

IN TEN YEARS’ TIME

Will Gaston Bonheur Sawadogo be blossoming in another profession In ten years’s time? “I have already suggested joining me in administration, but he would feel like he was betraying his vocation! I think he’s more likely to create a media outlet specialising in the processing of financial data, or the environment,” predicted Justin Sawadogo, an executive in public administration and friend of Gaston since Year 1 of secondary school. Éric Le Braz added: “He will be the top guy at a media outlet or a group of cutting-edge investigative media outlets, because Gaston is always quick to take all new genres of journalism on board.” Hardly anyone envisages him staying at L’Événement indefinitely. Gaston confirmed: “I love this newspaper, but I would like to create a press group of my own to provide jobs for people. I will always be involved in investigation and defending citizens’ rights, but in areas rarely covered until now, such as health, education or the environment.” Keen to share his knowledge, Gaston Bonheur Sawadogo would like his media outlet to also act as a training body.

“I write to raise ethical standards in public life and demand that human rights be respected. Gaston Bonheur is my pen name because in my investigations, I am also interested in covering the solutions needed.”

—



07

Lina Chawaf

THE VOICE OF A FREE SYRIA

Radio Rozana is an independent media outlet which was created in 2013 in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Its long-standing Chief Editor, a Syrian journalist in exile named Lina Chawaf, has now become the outlet's Executive Director.

Lina Chawaf comes from the Syrian capital of Damascus. Following on from her role as Chief Editor, she is now the Executive Director at Radio Rozana, a free and independent Syrian media outlet that broadcasts its programmes from Paris. The 50-year-old is also a member of the Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE).

A TV AND RADIO PERSONALITY IN SYRIA

Unlike most journalists, Lina Chawaf was already a familiar face in Syria before making a name for herself in radio. After studying fine arts, she was hired as an assistant to a renowned television director in the early 1990s before becoming a director herself at a Lebanese production company. Over twelve years, she produced more than 200 commercials, including TV clips on child awareness on behalf of UNICEF.

When the Syrian government was granting licences to develop private media outlets at the turn of the century, the young journalist applied for one and founded Arabesque FM, an adventure that very quickly became a success. “Arabesque was a very well-known, popular radio station even though we broadcast mainly light entertainment shows because of our licence, which prohibited us from all forms of politics or journalism,” she recalled. “But we did launch a number of programmes working with civil society and NGOs committed to human rights.”

RADIO ROZANA, A FREE MEDIA OUTLET

In 2011, Tunisia provided the spark that set off the Arab Spring protests. It did not take long to reach Syria where it was crushed with violence by the Bashar al-Assad regime. Lina was threatened by the authorities because she refused to broadcast propaganda supporting the regime, so she decided to go into exile abroad, first in Canada and then in France. At the same time, she took a job as editorial consultant for IMS (International Media Support), a cooperation agency in Denmark, with whom she launched a series of independent radio stations in several countries affected by the Arab revolutions. In 2013, she was appointed Chief Editor at Radio Rozana (which in Arabic means a “window that allows light in”), a free radio station considered to be a ray of light amid the daily gloom for Syrian citizens. “This radio station was necessary because thousands of civilians and many journalists had been killed since the conflict began and there was hardly anyone left to pick up the pieces,” explained Lina Chawaf. This project was established in partnership with CFI and received funding and logistical support to train the journalists and correspondents on site.

“CFI helped us in many ways training our correspondents on the Syrian-Turkish border and teaching them the basic rules of storytelling, conducting interviews, and also how to shoot and edit a video. CFI also helped us to find

premises, because it was not easy to be accepted as a Syrian radio station back then,” recalled the outlet’s Executive Director.

CHANGING SYRIAN SOCIETY FROM WITHIN

The newsroom is now set up in Paris, given the many Arabic-speaking journalists who live there, operating from a secret location to avoid any retaliation from the Syrian regime. The station has come a long way. Now boasting 8 million listeners, the station employs around 20 people and calls on a network of around 30 independent journalists. It is broadcast online on its website but also on FM radio in Southern Turkey and Northern Syria. Nationwide coverage is impossible because radical armed groups damaged the station’s transmitters. It aims to shift the Syrian regime by effecting change in society. “I have always thought that certain aspects of society needed to change, maybe because I spent half of my teenage years in Germany where my parents studied architecture. I soon noticed that many things were off limits to me as a woman in Syria, and I became aware of the routine injustices done to my female compatriots on a daily basis,” recounted Lina Chawaf.

This is what informs her editorial decisions, to educate future generations of Syrians. “You cannot clamour for freedom if you don’t agree with your daughter seeking an education. Many young men demanded freedom during the Arab uprisings, yet they were unwilling to extend that freedom to their sisters. A confusing and contradictory state of affairs. That is why Syrian society must be changed from within, which won’t happen overnight. You can bet that it will take generations, but at least we are beginning to sow the seeds for the future,” she said with a smile.

“Syrian society must be changed from within, which won’t happen overnight.”

Mohamed Taieb Chmengui

DREAM FM, THE FIRST COMMUNITY RADIO
IN KAIROUAN

In Tunisia, there are few local media outlets, with the major national outlets dominating the media scene. Mohamed Taieb Chmengui, who founded a community radio station in Kairouan called Dream FM, wants to overturn this situation.



Mohamed Taieb Chmengui runs Dream FM, a Tunisian community radio station that he also helped get off the ground. The station broadcasts cultural and political news and stories of public interest from the governorate of Kairouan.

However, the former mechanical engineering student with a Master in renewable energy admits that he entered this career by chance. “I really valued community life as a student, and given that I did not have any sort of talent for politics, I chose to get involved with journalism at a local media outlet instead.” Having already gained some experience during a brief stint as a student presenting a music programme at a commercial station, he decided to give it another shot, this time adopting a more activist, grass-roots stance: “I’ve always thought radio is more than mere entertainment, with the potential to change the world.”

He then went on to create Dream FM in 2016, alongside colleagues from a cultural organisation in the region where he coordinated various activities. At the time, the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication in Tunisia (HAICA) was inviting emerging radio stations to apply for broadcasting licences. Their application was successful, meaning that their dream literally came true.

COMMITTED PUBLIC MEDIA

Radio is an vital means of communication and raising awareness in the governorate of Kairouan, where 75% of its 60,000 inhabitants work on farms. Dream FM soon became a media organisation that promoted local development and raised awareness, as the presenter explained: “To guarantee freedom of expression, we need diversity of information. That’s why we wanted to make space for debates and discussions, which you have no chance of finding in the national media.” To provide ever more content to the people of Kairouan, volunteers at Dream FM forged ties with various partners in the region and abroad, including Cawtar (the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research), the Aswatona fund, the German Embassy, UNDP, the French Institute of Tunisia and organisations such as CFI. As Mohamed explains, “The agency helped us to roll out our media coverage of the 2019 general election. Thanks to CFI’s funding and strategic support, not only were we able to run radio advertisements encouraging people to vote, we also organised electoral debates between the various candidates in Kairouan”.

At the start of the Coronavirus pandemic, further support arrived from a partner that intended, this time round, to raise awareness of the risks and to vulgarise and broadcast scientific information, as Mohamed explained in more detail: “We first started using data journalism to give people wider access to information related to the pandemic, which we did by posting graphics on our social media accounts, but also through interviews with regional officials who

we invited on the air, such as the Governor of Kairouan, the Regional Director of the Post Office and the Mayor of Kairouan.”

MOBILISING YOUNG PEOPLE

Today, there are more than 20 young volunteers, students and civil society activists working to make Dream FM a reality. A mission that they plan to see through to the end, even if challenges exist whenever a country’s democracy is being completely transformed, as is the case in Tunisia: “While Tunisia may still be one of the Arab countries where freedom of the press fares best, it will take time for the media to gain true independence. The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 sought democracy and this is only possible with an independent press. Dream FM represents our dream of creating an independent media outlet of value to citizens. But nothing can be taken for granted; it’s a daily challenge.” Mohamed’s more immediate ambition is to switch Dream FM over to digital, and thus extend its coverage nationwide to provide all Tunisians with access to free, citizen-centred information.

“To guarantee freedom of expression, we need diversity of information. That’s why we wanted to make space for debates and discussions, which you have no chance of finding in the national media.”



Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne

A VERSATILE DIGITAL ENTREPRENEUR

With true passion for literature and journalism, Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne has worked in print media, radio and TV in Senegal. Aged 45, he now specialises in new technologies, coaching young journalists and offering innovative content through his company, Planète Digital Médias.

Curiosity is undoubtedly in his DNA. “As a child, I was a real bookworm! I even used to read the big dictionaries full of Latin expressions. My father always used to say ‘You’re going to be a journalist!’” remembered Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne, journalist, content producer and founder of Planète Digital Médias in Senegal.

In primary then secondary school, book lover Ibrahima first turned his pen to poetry: “My classmates called me Baudelaire! I wrote about everything I saw.” After his baccalaureate, he began studying humanities and law, and finally graduated in political journalism. This was the first of a very long list of qualifications: a Master 1 and 2 in Information Communication (ISC Dakar, then UFR Ingémédia at the University of Toulon), a Master 1 in International Relations (UCAD Dakar) and an International Master 2 in Media Management (“mizm” from ESJ Lille). Since 2014, Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne has been studying a PhD in Management Science with a Marketing and Communication option at the Gaston Berger University in St Louis, Senegal.

Ibrahima authored the book *La guerre des dieux ou l’ombre d’une profession* (War of the Gods or the Shadow of a Profession) on the relations between media, politics and religion in Senegal. While clearly an intellectual, he actually likes reporting on the ground, especially working for media groups Walfadjri and Futurs Médias. He won the 2003 RFI-Reporters Without Borders award, and 10 years later was nominated for the CNN African Journalist of the Year award, for his report detailing “the suffering of travellers between Dakar and Bamako”: “Even back then I was trying to get people to understand. And still today I would like to develop solutions journalism.”

A TALENTED CONTENT PRODUCER

Inspired by this constructive mindset, Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne founded his company, Planète Digital Médias (PDM) in 2017. “My mizm thesis, for which I received funding through CFI, focused on production challenges in Senegalese TV. Today, we’re coaching a dozen young digital talents. We connect them with seasoned journalists to help them grow and promote their projects. We have another division providing our customers with digital strategy and innovative content, such as documentaries.”

In 2020, PDM implemented digital strategy to broadcast 10 videos in French and Wolof for CFI’s MediaSahel project to fight Covid-19. Ibrahima explained: “We got all social media involved, as well as our influencers. Our young designers learnt how to set up a project.” Nowadays, Ibrahima defines himself as “a digital entrepreneur”, while Digital Manager and Administrator at PDM Mick Camara goes into more detail: “Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne knows how to spot talent, manage a team and share his knowledge. All that matters to him is succeeding as a team.” The former Company Secretary of Walfadjri, Ballé Preira, who got to know Ibrahima there some 20 years ago, is not sur-

prised by his friend’s progression: “He likes to take on challenges, build projects and deliver innovative content. He does not want to do everyday things.” Determined to share his original love of the profession, the boss of PDM also teaches at several Senegalese universities: “My speciality remains large-scale investigation, because that’s the most comprehensive genre in journalism, involving research, informing and finding the solution. Journalism must serve a purpose!” Putting this conviction into practice, Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne is currently working on two film projects in the public interest: a medium-length documentary on Covid-19 and a short on undocumented immigration.

IN TEN YEARS’S TIME

Ballé Preira observed: “In the international media battle for content, Senegal has been left behind for the time being. Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne has the energy and capability to become the leading media entrepreneur of a pan-African multimedia project of benefit to citizens, which would monitor public policy.” Ibrahima himself seems to want to work collectively to achieve these goals: “In ten years’s time, I would like to see PDM grow as a hotbed for young talent, and even become a digital empire with a digital TV channel. I don’t want a regular radio-TV newspaper media empire in Senegal.” Younger brother El Hadji Ousmane Kébé Diagne would like his versatile digital entrepreneur elder brother to “stay true to himself and continue to do his work with love, a professional attitude and humility”.

“My speciality remains large-scale investigation, because that’s the most comprehensive genre in journalism, involving research, informing and finding the solution. Journalism must serve a purpose!”

Moussa Diallo

A HEAD FULL OF IMAGES, 24/7

Moussa Diallo is a Senegalese screenwriter and aspiring director. Curious, observant and at the same time strongly action-oriented, he devotes himself full-time to his passion.



If you pass him in the streets of Senegal, don't be offended if 39-year-old Moussa Diallo doesn't greet you! A promising screenwriter and director, Moussa is sometimes in his own world, searching for stories, characters and images for film and television: "When I start a project, I work on it round the clock, even when walking down the street. My obsession for doing things right means I never sleep the night before a shoot."

But where does this energy come from, this "drive to succeed", as he calls it? Moussa Diallo explains that the people he grew up with were often baffled by his insatiable curiosity. "Weapons, arrests, action, suspense. I grew up with it all as a child as my father was a gendarme. Although he forbade me to do so, I would sometimes approach prisoners to talk with them," recalled Moussa. Immersed in non-stop observation and action, the young man dropped out of school before his exams, seemingly on the verge of turning to the dark side. One night, a former teacher of mine took a photo of me during a night club brawl. He said 'This is not you!' Doudou Haydara, a maths teacher who also manages an editing suite/camera rental studio, then introduced the young Moussa to film: "I spent five years reporting. When I was filming weddings, I saw brides who were not in love and grooms with no means of supporting their future family. I felt compelled to tell their stories. I then went on to film hip-hop music videos and popular theatre films."

TRAINING IN THE UNITED STATES OR IN FRANCE

His desire to write for himself gave rise to a number of scenarios, such as his first short film (Cette nuit-là (Tonight), which won an award at the Clap Ivoire festival in Abidjan) and Justice Divine, which provided inspiration for the second season of Tundu Wundu (Cats' Lair), named best series at Fespaco 2017 (Burkina Faso). Producer-director Abdoulahad Wone was immediately won over by this story and Moussa himself, being "willing to sacrifice himself to succeed". Anna Gomis, who created the pan-African series, Renaissance (based on an original idea by Alexandre Rideau) confirmed: "Moussa is capable of working on scripts and sequences from 10.00 pm to 4.00 am! Fellow screenwriter Dialika Sané co-wrote the series, Wara (Wild Animals), with Moussa and other writers. It was co-produced by the French Development Agency and TV5 Monde, in partnership with the Senegalese NGO, RAES (African Network for Health Education). She told us: "Moussa is a profiler with a great sense of observation and an incredible imagination! When he has an idea, he will write to you at 3.00 am and draw you into it with him."

Moussa Diallo realises that he has learnt a lot over the last few years, thanks in particular to CFI: "The writing workshops (Editor's note: part of the Writing and producing in Africa project) taught me diverse perspectives for bringing my films to life. For Wara, I was taught how to write by several writers from different countries. I now want to structure my knowledge and obtain a

scholarship to train in the United States or in France." This would bring the budding director closer to his idols, masters of action and suspense Tarantino, Besson and Hitchcock. Even Moussa's gendarme father, Mbaye Diallo, was eventually won over by his son's enthusiasm: "At the time, given how smart he is, I was expecting him to go on to higher education, but I have been pleasantly surprised by his career. Moussa has even helped his brothers to get into his trade." A "Family Resemblance" reminiscent of French director Cédric Klapisch, which is now putting ideas of working together in Moussa's cinema-loving mind.

IN TEN YEARS'S TIME

The response is unanimous. "In ten years's time, Moussa Diallo will be directing his own films." Producer-director Abdoulahad Wone pointed out that "He already enjoys writing and has proved he has the drive and imagination. I was an editor before becoming a director. You improve with each project you complete." Series creator Anna Gomis has encouraged Moussa to be more daring when meeting directors on set: "As a screenwriter, he knows the emotion that each character needs to convey." Screenwriter Dialika Sané envisages him writing and directing "political thrillers, action films and films with a message." Stigmatised drug addicts, the kidnapping of a politician's family: it is true that, to date, Moussa Diallo has not really been in the habit of addressing light subject-matter: "We still have plenty of traditional stories up our sleeves, but I would like my films to be a window on the world." In ten years's time, Moussa hopes that he will have trained with directors and film schools abroad: "I need to have complete confidence in my skills if I am to set up a production company (Editor's note: possibly as a family business) and make films for TV and cinema."

"The writing workshops taught me diverse perspectives for bringing my films to life."



11

Amélie Gue

COMMITTED JOURNALIST 2.0

During the 2014 Revolution in Burkina Faso, Amélie Gue was one of very few women reporters out on the front line. Now aged 32, she continues her civic commitments in her show AmiNet.

On TV, her voice is more often than not assured. Her passion is palpable. Creator and presenter of the show AmiNet dedicated to social media, 32-year-old Amélie Gue from Burkina Faso has journalism firmly rooted within her. “I’ve always wanted to do this job! Day and night, Dad kept his little radio with him. We used to listen to the news, investigations and political debates on a loop.” Determined to “provide information and contribute to citizen awakening,” Amélie left her hometown Bobo-Dioulasso for the capital, Ouagadougou. There, she graduated with a BA in Modern Literature, then a Master in journalism from the Pan-African Institute of Study and Research on Media, Information and Communication (IPERMIC).

Her career got off to quite the flying start with the Citizen’s Revolution of 2014, which put an end to the 27-year reign of former president Blaise Compaoré. “Even when the demonstrations were suppressed, with some saying that a woman’s place was not on the front line, Amélie stayed on the ground, trainers on her feet. Director of Burkina Info TV Ismaël Ouédraogo explained that “She showed that female journalism in Burkina Faso was not just newsreaders with pretty faces!” Amélie agreed: “It’s true, there weren’t many of us in the field, but when you love your job, you learn and you take the plunge!”

However, the young journalist has had two narrow escapes while on duty: during the attempted military coup of 2015, she avoided being whipped at a roadblock of the Presidential Security Regiment, then got beaten up a few days later by protesters still faithful to the former president. Did getting a shoulder wound make her think she did not have the stature of a journalist after all? “No, it’s a risky job, but when you embrace it, you commit yourself to it. Being a reporter isn’t just hanging out in cushy, air-conditioned lounges!” the young woman assured us, more determined than ever to “be useful to others”.

“AN INTREPID JOURNALIST AND COMMITTED ACTIVIST”

Her sense of civic commitment was first awoken in Year 1 at secondary school! At the time, little Amélie was already telling her classmates about HIV/AIDS, during informal debates. Luther Yameogo has been carrying out civic activities with Amélie Gue for 10 years. Now working as Principal Civic Society Outreach Officer at the African Development Bank (AfDB), he appreciates “her single-minded career as an intrepid reporter who’s adept at fact-checking, and as an activist committed to monitoring public policies.”

With this dual role, the CFI training courses delivered via the Faso Media and Media 360° projects were doubly useful to her: “I still use tools for citizen monitoring of public policies and online fact-checking received at the training sessions.” Cyriaque Paré (founder of lefaso.net) emphasises that this “journalist 2.0” is “quick to respond and find the right contacts”. Amélie is now the creator and presenter of the show AmiNet, dedicated to social media. The first season, broadcast on the Burkina TV channel BF1, ended in June 2020, after

30 episodes: “The outcome is positive. Some Internet users are now better known, in particular citizens who create applications to find out about or treat Covid-19. We are currently looking for partners for season 2.”

IN TEN YEARS’S TIME

In ten years’s time, Amélie Gue would like to “inspire and empower other young women to tell themselves that anything is possible, as long as they trust themselves and dare to take the plunge. I hope that by then I will have succeeded in making AmiNet grow, why not outside Burkina Faso. We also want to go into schools and talk to students to prevent behaviour like bullying on social media.” With his 30 years’ experience in the media, especially online (lefaso.net), Cyriaque Paré believes that Amélie and AmiNet have potential: “She has the creative flair and determination she needs to be her own boss and develop her show into a fully-fledged niche channel with a digital theme!”

Luther Yameogo, who has been conducting civic activities with Amélie Gue for years, also believes that “Amélie is well versed in human rights. I see her heading a digital media company involved in the monitoring of public policy in Africa, although she would need to train in media project management.” Amélie Gue is now an entrepreneur, yet still abides by the code of ethics governing journalism: “I will refuse funding from politicians, to make sure that citizens can continue to question and criticise.”

**“It’s true, there weren’t many
of us in the field, but
when you love your job, you learn
and you take the plunge!”**



12

Latifa Salissou Hassane

THE HUMANIST GEEK FROM NIGER

In Niger, very few girls go on to higher education, especially in science. With a Master in software engineering, 28-year-old Latifa Salissou Hassane has managed to create a start-up, an NGO and state-of-the-art tools for the health and safety of her fellow citizens.

“You have the same brain as men! Don’t put barriers up! Don’t let yourself be influenced!” Salissou Hassane Latifa, 28, tirelessly hammers her message home for young girls in her country. According to UNICEF, only 2 in 10 pupils finished secondary school in Niger in 2019 and 3 in 4 girls were married before the age of 18. So Latifa deems herself lucky to have grown up with parents who went to school and a father who was a geek long before it was even a thing: “When we were children, he tried to instil in us his passion for computing by introducing us to the computer”.

Salissou Hassane Latifa appreciated this, but already felt the appeal of another vocation: “From a very early age, I loved making myself useful to others.” Her cousin Safia Diawara recounted: “At school, she was the one who would smooth things out when there were arguments in class. She was the sort of confident student that teachers don’t forget, with a leader profile. At home, Latifa always managed to get us all together, even the most distant family members.” With her sociable nature, she considered a humanitarian career as a doctor, but ultimately drew inspiration from her family, turning to “the technology of the future”, earning a Bachelor and Master in software engineering from the École supérieure des télécommunications (EST) in Niamey. Determined to combine her education with her calling, she created an app called Saro (“security”, in Hausa) to help locate and rescue the victims of road accidents. She won the national 2017 e-Takara competition for young digital talent, and in Rwanda, the 2018 Miss Geek Africa award - an annual competition recognising technological innovation by young Africans: “These prizes really triggered my ambition. I told myself that there were no limits to what you want to achieve!”

ON THE FRONT LINE TACKLING COVID-19

Thus fired up, Latifa has launched many more initiatives. She co-founded the start-up InnovElle in 2018, and acts as Innovation and Digital Transformation Officer there. She also volunteers as Executive Director of the NGO Hope Sahel, founded in late 2019 to “promote the employability of young people and gender equality for girls”. With six employees and over 100 volunteers, the organisation launched a project in 2020 to curb Covid-19, with CFI support, via the MediaSahel project: “We met with local authorities and suggested talks with young people and programmes on community radio stations in Diffa (Editor’s note: in the south-east of Niger, on the Nigerian border). People in this region were subjected to lockdown on two fronts, because of insecurity as well as a lack of information on the virus.”

Now more fully informed, young people are now reported to be complying more with health measures. “As the boss, Latifa has succeeded in enlisting everyone’s support!” exclaimed Bachir Idrissa Moussa, Executive Secretary of Hope Sahel. With a firm commitment to fighting the virus, Salissou

Hassane Latifa also took on the role of coach at the 2020 Coronackathon, a fully online competition open to all young Nigeriens producing innovative solutions to fight the virus: “She shared her project management experience with the competitors. These young people knew Latifa, she is a role model for them,” stated Almoctar Seyni Moussa, a fellow geek and co-organiser of the competition. This gave Salissou Hassane Latifa other ideas: “I would like to set up a ‘Girls in ICT Niger’ community for young girls in tech to get together, with professionals who can serve as role models to guide them, also involving male volunteers.

IN TEN YEARS’S TIME

According to her close friends, Salissou Hassane Latifa is a multi-tasker and multi-idea generator, a trait that seems bound to grow and flourish in the future. Her cousin Safia Diawara told us: “She will no doubt have developed several social and environmental applications, to tackle desertification for instance. She will have become one of the most influential women in Niger!” Her geek friend Almoctar Seyni Moussa added: “In ten years’s time, I see her heading up a digital company or a digital development department within a company.” Bachir Idrissa Moussa, however, does not see her completely leaving Hope Sahel: “Latifa could work for the United Nations in the education sector, but she wouldn’t be an employee there, as she wants to take Hope Sahel as far as possible.” A sentiment confirmed by Latifa Salissou Hassane herself: “In ten years’s time, I hope our NGO will be working throughout Africa to promote youth employment and fight gender inequality. My biggest dream would be for the UN to partner with Hope Sahel to boost our impact.” And all this while keeping one foot outside the system to maintain her independence and ideas.

“I hope our NGO will be working throughout Africa to promote youth employment and fight gender inequality.”

Lo'ai Hazem

AL HUDOOD, SATIRE AS AN ANTIDOTE
TO CENSORSHIP

Al Hudood is an offbeat, satirical newspaper published in Jordan. This media oddity is primarily a means of subverting political prohibitions and pushing the boundaries of freedom of expression. Meeting with Lo'ai Hazem, cartoonist and journalist at the newspaper.



Back in 2013, a young Jordanian entrepreneur called Isam Uraiqat decided to launch Al Hudood, a parody news outlet. Similar to The Onion in the USA and Le Gorafi in France, it covers politics and societal issues from a deliberately irreverent angle. In just a few short years, it has managed to establish itself as a credible alternative newspaper among young people who have lost confidence in the mainstream media since the Arab Spring. Lo'ai Hazem is a political cartoonist who has worked with Al Hudood since 2015: "Previously, I had mostly worked for local newspapers. When Al Hudood asked me to draw for them, I did one, then they asked me for a second, and then a third, and now they can't do without me!"

COMBATING FAKE NEWS

Since joining the editorial team, he has unrelentingly tackled sensitive issues such as corruption, gender equality and governance in the Middle East, without ever compromising. With the proliferation of fake news on social media, his task has taken on paramount importance. According to the cartoonist, "We launched the Al Hudood Awards for Arab journalism in 2017 to counter the spread of fake news. This award highlights the worst examples of propaganda found in the Arab media, such as hate speech inciting sectarian hatred and xenophobia. We also have an in-house fact-checking team focused on detecting fake news published in the regional press, that we correct, just like a teacher marking homework. We publish these corrective articles in the print or digital version of our newspaper."

SATIRE, THE LAST BASTION OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE ARAB MEDIA?

Although the Arab revolutions have helped create fertile ground for the emergence of media outlets like Al Hudood, the newspaper does sometimes cause controversy by publishing certain articles, as Lo'ai explains: "We have written a lot about Isis and taboos in Islamic culture, which has led to threats and hate speech being levelled against us. However, our aim is not to use satire to attack the views held by others; instead we use it to put forward our own views in order to open up a dialogue."

He explained that the satirical nature of Al Hudood makes it easier for it to tackle issues that are seen as sensitive in the region, such as religion or politics, and to circumvent the severe restrictions on freedom of expression that are still in place in Jordan. The advantage of satire is that it can drive a point or idea home more effectively: "When you make your readers laugh, they can relate more easily to your message." Al Hudood also enjoys a degree of freedom thanks to its economic model, based primarily on partnerships with international and local organisations that share its values, thereby avoiding dependence on the powers that be (unlike other media outlets), as well as avoiding censorship.

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF CARTOONISTS

Two years ago, Al Hudood decided to take things a step further by training journalists in satire. This consisted of a 5-day training course, delivered in partnership with CFI, catering to young people eager to discover the basics of satire. Although only available in Jordan for now, the course could be extended to other countries in the Arab world to train a whole new generation of satirical cartoonists.

Lo'ai further explained that "Our region has a rich heritage of satirical shows and programmes. Our workshops are a means of building on this heritage and sharing it, for more voices to be heard. This is a profession that seems to be more at risk than ever today, but one that is nonetheless essential to guaranteeing freedom of expression in the region."

“Our aim is not to use satire to attack the views held by others; instead we use it to put forward our own views in order to open up a dialogue.”



14

Abdoul- Razak Idrissa

PART RAMBO, PART KIRIKOU, ALL JOURNALIST

In Niger, 38-year-old Abdoul-Razak Idrissa is a radio journalist and journalism instructor. A seasoned professional, he is valued for his lively spirit, like Kirikou, and his uninhibited character, like Rambo, even when interviewing well-known figures.

As a child, Abdoul-Razak Idrissa loved both Rambo and Kirikou (Translator's Note: the plucky little hero of a French cartoon feature set in Africa). The strongman, "for his bravery and courage", and the little Kirikou, because he is «very crafty and manages to overcome almost all obstacles". But back then, Abdoul-Razak was, above all, an ardent radio fan: "In Niger at the time, there was only one public media outlet, but I never wanted to miss even one newscast. I knew the names of all the newsreaders. I sometimes even imitated them. For us, living out in a rural region (Editor's note: in Dosso, 140 km east of Niamey), it was our source of information to find out what was up in the capital".

As soon as he had finished his baccalaureate, Abdoul-Razak Idrissa naturally moved to Niamey to study journalism at IFTIC (Training Institute for Information and Communication Technologies) for three years. Even though he usually acted as MC or DJ at parties with friends, radio was a challenge for him: "I was quite shy, but I wanted to follow through with my decision and not let myself down. And then, I got good feedback from my first internships."

"NO REPORT IS WORTH DYING FOR!"

Ali Idrissa, Director-General of Radio-Television Labari has known Abdoul-Razak since he first debuted as a journalist. He recalled: "He stood out from the rest. He wrote elaborate articles, remained calm when reading the news, and stood up to well-known figures when interviewing them." Rambo's courage, blended with Kirikou's curiosity. As an "elder" in Niger, with 20 years' experience in journalism and communication, Djibril Seydou's assessment was that "Abdoul-Razak has become an excellent journalist, but he has kept his ear to the ground. He is polite and kind, and still calls his more experienced colleagues for advice."

Now aged 38, with 15 years in the media behind him, Abdoul-Razak Idrissa is still up for hard-hitting interviews or to provide advice for young workers at Radio-TV Labari. However, he now spends most of his time on his activities as Niger correspondent for VOA Afrique (a French-language service provided by Voice of America) and as a journalism instructor, enthusing that: "With CFI, I took two 'Train the Trainer' courses in Burkina Faso before becoming an instructor in 2019 for the Sahel Dialogue project. Thanks to these experiences, I feel I can be of more help to my colleagues."

Because, in a country almost entirely on France's travel red list, Abdoul-Razak personifies meticulous journalism: "Nobody forced us to choose this career! We have to inform the public, irrespective of our own financial insecurity. I also tell young people to work out which subjects are sensitive and the precautions you need to take. No report is worth dying for! You have to stay alive to impart your news!" So ultimately, even a Rambo fan can urge caution.

IN TEN YEARS'S TIME

What will Abdoul-Razak's day-to-day routine be like In ten years's time? He himself estimated that "Without a doubt, it will involve more teaching than journalism. I feel right at home with my instructor's hat on!" With his many years' experience in journalism and communication, Djibril Seydou is of the same mind: "Abdoul-Razak is simply blossoming as a journalist instructor." He has been sharing his knowledge since late 2019, especially in his role as Executive Director of AJ-SEM, the journalists' organisation for safety and migration: "The organisation has about 10 specialist journalists involved as active members. We have already circulated a code of ethics for the media coverage of migration among our colleagues. In the future, we want to conduct joint surveys. When it comes to these cross-border issues, we will be more effective if we work as a network in Niger, West Africa and even beyond!" Abdoul-Razak Idrissa is ambitious. How about pursuing a political career one day, like other journalists before him? "Never! I prefer alternative action to improve the situation in my country."

"Nobody forced us to choose this career! We have to inform the public, irrespective of our own financial insecurity."



Solange Shagayo Kagombe

THE RADIO STAR AT RADIO STAR

In the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Solange Shagayo Kagombe is the Director of Radio Star, L'étoile du berger (Morning star). Now leading the way for young people, especially young women, her journey has yet been more laborious than that of a shooting star.

“I had two problems: being a woman and being young!” laughed Solange Shagayo Kagombe, without any sign of a grudge. The current Director of Radio Star, L'étoile du berger (Morning Star) in Bukavu, DR Congo, reminisced on the beginning of her career in 2008, working her way up the ladder at the station, one rung at a time. Presenter, marketing executive, then she finally made it to the newsroom and was promoted to Programme Manager. Eight years ago, she was acting Director, and yet certain male colleagues continued to gripe: “There were men who were old enough to be my father who were reporting to me and they kept telling me that they had more credentials.”

Not being the kind to shrink in the face of adversity, Solange earned an International Master in Media Management from the Lille School of Journalism (ESJ) in France, further to her 2-year course in journalism at the IWPR (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, an international network of media support organisations). She was then officially appointed Director. The fighting spirit she deployed was no doubt forged during her troubled childhood: “Back in 1996, when I was 10, (Editor’s note: during the First Congo War), I left Bukavu amid the sound of rapid gunfire. I was separated from my family.” During this period, Solange Shagayo Kagombe met many other young people even more deprived than her, living on the streets or in refugee camps.

WORK TWICE AS HARD AS THE MEN!

She paused to reflect and then continued: “There is no doubt that this experience fuelled my commitment to helping young people. When I returned to Bukavu in 2006, I wanted to advise young people, to empower them and show that they could shape their own future without having to become members of parliament.” At Radio Star (“News young people can relate to”), she would find an outlet to spread her message and challenge her shy nature. Her older sister, Sylvie Muray, jokingly remembered that “Solange did not speak much as a child. So when she told us about ‘her journalism thing’, we asked her what she was going to say on the radio! She has a hidden talent because she is completely herself on the air!” Solange recognised that she pretty much has two sides to her personality: “I am reserved but when it comes to my job, I speak up when I have to!” Christian Mihigo, former Coordinator at Radio Star, praised “her soft skills, expertise and leadership.” Soft-spoken Solange Shagayo Kagombe has fully assumed her role as Director: “The future of Radio Star, a talented team of driven young people, is what motivates me nowadays. Two of our journalists have received training via CFI’s Media 360° project. We now have a website that is regularly updated with new articles and our Facebook page went from 2,000 to 10,000 followers”. There’s hardly any reason for Solange to change tack: “(For women to) be accepted and succeed, we have work twice as hard as the men! We have to study and grab every opportunity to reach the top!” As the

head of Radio Star, L'étoile du berger, a station where the staff has an average age of 24, Solange Shagayo Kagombe speaks her mind and leads the way.

IN TEN YEARS'S TIME

Just how far will Solange Shagayo Kagombe’s lucky star take her? Her older sister, Sylvie Muray, believes she will become “Head of communications at a major media company” In ten years’s time. Christian Mihigo, who was previously her coordinator at Radio Star, believes that she will “shake up the media scene”. Not only is Solange already lobbying for laws to be amended in order to lower the taxes imposed on regional media outlets, she is also campaigning to restrict the rules that currently allow almost any politician or political figure to launch their own radio station in the run-up to an election, with journalists receiving neither a salary nor a contract. Solange condemned this practice: “As a result, some journalists are writing flattering pieces about their interviewees out of gratitude that they footed the bill for their travelling expenses.” As for where Solange sees herself In ten years’s time? Leading a media or youth support organisation or, if she has the means to do so, “raising the professional skills of the Radio Star team or creating another community radio station to educate young people”.

“(For women to) be accepted and succeed, we have work twice as hard as the men! We have to study and grab every opportunity to reach the top!”



16

Tatiana Kozak

SUPPORTING JUDICIAL REFORM IN UKRAINE

Tatiana Kozak has been an independent journalist in Ukraine for 10 years. She primarily covers transitional justice and human rights issues in the former Soviet territories: an achievement resulting from a long journey in support of justice.

Tatiana Kozak hasn't always been a journalist. She initially embarked on a career as an English and German interpreter, then started exploring writing and journalism in 2010, when blogs and online media were still in their infancy. She started working as a blogger and editorial secretary at korrespondent.net, which was a leading online media outlet in Ukraine at the time. However, it was the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, also known as Euromaidan, which truly propelled her into the world of journalism. When her former media outlet was bought by an oligarch, Tatiana joined the team at Hromadske, a new-generation online television channel created by the journalists themselves and financed by public funds from various European countries.

THE UKRAINIAN REVOLUTION THROWING A JOURNALIST IN AT THE DEEP END

“Euromaidan led me to cover the war in Donbas, which gave my career in journalism a huge boost,” Kozak explained. She reported from the front line on the situation of the displaced populations for several local and international media outlets. “Back then, it was easy to get to the front line,” she recalled. “Nowadays anyone wanting to go there needs to obtain a special press pass, involving a lot of red tape.” Her experience taught her a lot about the inner workings of reporting in conflict zones.

Since then, she has freelanced for various local and international media outlets (BBC Ukraine, Radio Svoboda, openDemocracy, Hromadske, Ukrayinska Pravda, BuzzFeed, Transitions Online etc.), as well as participating in independent projects. She has managed to secure funding for these projects from participatory funding campaigns, along the lines of Unrecognized Stories. For one such project, she has investigated people living in self-proclaimed, but unofficial, enclave states within post-Soviet countries. This adventure took her to Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan.

For Tatiana Kozak, retaining her independence as a journalist is paramount. In order to do so, she has secured funding for her projects from international organisations as well as taking on more lucrative jobs, such as translation. “The problem nowadays is that most Ukrainian media outlets are owned by oligarchs. The former president [Editor’s note: Petro Poroshenko, in power from 2014 to 2019] had one during his presidency, as does everyone else in positions of power. This situation stems directly from the economic issues media outlets have to contend with when attempting to maintain their independence. These days, if a media outlet wishes to remain independent, it must either receive grants from Western organisations or rely upon participatory funding. Some survive on advertising, but that is very rare,” she explained.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Kozak is now a contributor to openDemocracy, where she covers women’s and LGBT rights. She is also a member of the editorial team at Graty, a new media outlet specialising in court reporting, for which she covers human rights and transitional justice cases.

She joined the Pravo Justice project in 2019, to learn more about the Ukrainian judicial system and lend her support to judicial reform. The project supports judicial reform and receives financial backing from several international donors, in partnership with CFI. This was a rewarding time for the young journalist, as she explained: “I was already familiar with the judicial system, but Pravo Justice was a great opportunity to expand my knowledge, giving me access to leading journalists, lawyers, judges and prosecutors.” Following this training, she published a report on a case opposing LGBT organisations in Ukraine and the national government, as well as an in-depth report on the court case concerning the referendum organised by pro-Russian separatists in 2013 in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The vote was not recognised by Ukraine and led to the secession of part of the Donbas territories and the deadly conflict that has been raging in eastern Ukraine since 2013. It is her way of documenting the history of her country and building its future.

“Euromaidan led me to cover the war in Donbas, which gave my career in journalism a huge boost.”



17

Soklim Ky

TAKING THE ROUGH WITH THE SMOOTH
AS A REPORTER

The founder of the online media outlet Thmey Thmey oversaw training for 80 young Cambodian journalists. He shares his vision for journalism and his secrets for a long life.

Looking sprightly and wary, as befits a reporter with his ear to the ground, journalist Soklim Ky is the founder and director of the general-interest news website Thmey Thmey ('New' in Khmer). In 2019, he participated in a Mekong: Sustainable News project, overseeing the training of 80 citizen reporters selected following a call for applications. This training took the form of a 2-day introduction focused on ethics. "Journalism is a profession, with its own structure and rules. The important thing is to bring your intellect," remarked this 50-year-old professional sitting in the garden outside his office in Phnom Penh. "Nowadays, many young people stream live on Facebook without thinking very much about the point of their topic, or analysing their content, and that can have negative consequences," he explained.

AN EARLY CAREER IN THE FRENCH-LANGUAGE PRESS

Born in Takéo, south of the capital, Soklim began studying in the French language department of the Royal University of Phnom Penh in 1992. He had already absorbed some French, since it was still widely spoken in Cambodia at the time. Five years later, the young graduate turned his hand to journalism. "I was a regular reader of the local press, and I must admit that I found it far more interesting than French literature," he observed ironically. In 1998, he joined the *Cambodge Soir*, the country's only remaining daily newspaper in French. "This is where I learnt the trade, how to find topics, angles, my voice, and so on. There was no local editorial style to speak of, so I drew inspiration from the French- and English-language press and adapted it to a Cambodian readership." He left the newsroom in 2007, to become an RFI correspondent, until he realised that he wanted to set up his own media outlet.

With Delux Leang, another veteran reporter, Soklim had the idea of creating an online newspaper. He reminisced: "We wanted to change the media scene: to set up a looser, less politically polarised media outlet. Once they had brought investors and sponsors on board, and obtained a licence from the government, they founded Thmey Thmey in 2012. "We started at my house, with two tables and two chairs," Soklim recalled. "Today, there are around 40 employees and 20 freelancers in the newsroom, most of whom have rural or modest backgrounds. The website attracts 200,000 to 300,000 unique visitors per day, publishing 40 to 50 general-interest news articles a day, some short and others providing more detail.

A FIRST COLLABORATION WITH CFI DEDICATED TO THE RURAL WORLD

In 2018, CFI supported the launch of a new website, Thmey Thmey 25, featuring videos of up to five minutes, on subjects such as farming, tourism and typically Cambodian products, such as sugar loaf from Kampong Speu and Kampot pepper. "We also make advertorials for local producers, including their contact details so that consumers can contact them directly. This pro-

notes the agriculture sector and helps to stem the rural exodus," he explained. Boasting 350 videos and a total of 40 million views, the website has great resonance.

TAKING SOCIAL MEDIA BY STORM

Always quick to innovate, Soklim launched Thmey Thmey's new English section, *Cambodianess*, in 2019, to "establish our presence on the international market and reach out to the Cambodian Diaspora worldwide." According to Soklim, it is ever more vital to invest in social media given that print media is on its way out. "Most of our readers find us through Facebook, which has become a primary source of news for Cambodians. In fact, people seem to be reading more than before, and for many people it is a fantastic way to gain knowledge," he acknowledged, without a hint of nostalgia. The media entrepreneur has not lost his love of reporting, and still sets off on adventures from time to time, for example to make archaeological documentaries in the temples of Angkor.

"Journalism is a profession, with its own structure and rules. The important thing is to bring your intellect."



Ramatou Baoua N'gobi

THE (DISCREET) WARRIOR FROM PARAKOU

At just 41 years of age, Ramatou Baoua N'gobi is Coordinator of the Beninese Solidarity and Initiatives for Development Centre (CSID-Bénin). Discreet but determined, she knows how to listen and show humility.

We can easily imagine a griot, as a tall, virile, venerable, and eloquent figure. And while Ramatou Baoua N'gobi may belong to this caste of travelling troubadours and poets, at just 1.56 m, the discreet Coordinator of CSID-Benin is far from typical. "Ramatou has inherited respect for the given word from her caste," explained her uncle, anthropologist Morat Lafia Kora Yémagui Ali. "My background informs my easy, humble approach to people, because a griot always works to serve their king," the young woman added. This attitude is compounded by her own character: "Even at an early age, Ramatou loved listening to others and helping them," her aunt, Mauna Boussou, recalled.

After graduating in management (focusing on marketing and management of organisations) from the University of Parakou in 2013, followed by a Master in project management in 2018, Ramatou initially worked as a Community Development Officer. On her motorbike, she toured villages for the Parakou regional branch of the Institut Kilimandjaro before becoming the Officer for Administration and Finance in 2010. In 2014, she was appointed Coordinator of the NGO CSID-Bénin, replacing her manager, Sahadou Ali Zato.

SHE NEVER TIRES OF WORKING!

Now a management consultant and trainer, Sahadou reminisced: "As Officer for Administration and Finance, Ramatou reported directly to me and, even then, she had an excellent grasp of donor procedures. As her mentor, I saw potential in her that even she was unaware of!" However, the arrival of a 34-year-old woman at the head of the CSID did stir up prejudice, according to Sahadou: "Some people thought Ramatou was just a figurehead and that I was still running things. They have now realised that she has all the powers and that I spend less and less time there."

Safianou Wabi Alassane values his boss's kindly leadership style: "Ramatou puts herself in the other person's shoes. When she gives me a task to do, she gives me her input to ensure we succeed. She likes to get everything right and never tires of working." Thanks to this individual and collective energy, CSID-Benin has collected several testimonials of good performance from multiple partners, including congratulations from CFI. Ramatou valued the experience as a technical and logistical partner for Benin Citizens' Dialogue 1 & 2: "These projects gave me the opportunity to meet lots of people. I try to learn from others' feedback and not repeat the same mistakes. I never admit defeat!" In April 2019, during the first seminar for Benin Citizens' Dialogue 2 and after listening closely to Ramatou Baoua N'gobi's speech for around 100 people, one attendee searched in vain for the name of the discreet coordinator of CSID-Benin. He ended up calling her "the warrior from Parakou". The nickname suits her rather well.

IN TEN YEARS'S TIME

Ramatou Baoua N'gobi is the current Coordinator of CSID-Benin, but what heights will she scale in the future? In ten years's time, her former manager, Sahadou Ali Zato, would like to see her as the "Director of Administrative Affairs and Finance at a sub-regional project or international organisation, or an expert in citizenship and female leadership issues." Her colleague, Safianou Wabi Alassane, "hopes that Ramatou will advocate for women in an international position. She knows how to coordinate and is already working locally with women's groups." In the words of her aunt, Mauna Boussou: "Ramatou will obviously move up, because she pushes herself in everything she does. She should continue as a team leader and keep ahead!" Never one to take the credit for herself, discreet Ramatou hopes "to help women step into the limelight in the community rather than wait for men to decide for them." In short, In ten years's time, "the warrior from Parakou" would like to continue the fight in an international NGO or "at the head of a Solidarity and Initiatives for Development Centre for the whole of Africa, which would coordinate all the CSIDs".

"I try to learn from others' feedback and not repeat the same mistakes."



Hoàng Nhật Nguyễn

AIMING TO STIR PEOPLE'S CONSCIENCES

The Deputy Head of the Vietnam+ site wants to alert the general public in Vietnam as to the most pressing environmental issues.

“We are profoundly affected by climate change and are vulnerable to natural hazards: our goal is to sound the alarm,” Hoàng Nhật Nguyễn **drove home his message as Deputy Head of the Vietnam+ website.** The country’s first multimedia portal is part of the Vietnam News Agency (VNA), based in Hanoi. In 2020, for CFI’s Mekong: Sustainable News project, Hoàng selected a group of five, “top, award-winning journalists” to produce content highlighting the key environmental challenges facing this country, with its 3,200 km of coastline. “We’ve reported on deforestation, heavy inland flooding and the dangers weighing on the Mekong, such as the proliferation of hydroelectric dams. This is a topic of particular concern to us as Vietnam is the country furthest downstream,” he explained. In all, five articles, a video and two photo features will shortly be published on Vietnam+. “We’ve given preference to long articles, incorporating photos and infographics. This popular format attracts new readers.”

FROM FOOTBALL FIELD TO REPORTING IN THE FIELD

With 20 years’ experience, Hoàng has spent almost half of his life in media. He knew from a very early age what he wanted to do when he grew up: “I’ve always been a huge football supporter, and even as a young boy, I wanted to see matches from the inside, not just on TV,” he remembered. This passionate fan of Messi and Nguyễn Quang Hải, the local star player, studied at the VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi, and then kicked off his career in the media in the VNA’s Sports and Culture Department. “I was thrilled, living my dream of becoming a sports journalist!” he recalled. However, after a few years, Hoàng felt the urge to broaden his horizons. In 2011, he joined the Vietnam+ newsroom where he was tasked with developing creative projects aimed at a young audience. His greatest achievement was Rap News+, a news programme broadcast on the site from 2013 to 2017, with the newsreaders rapping the news stories to appeal to the 15-25 age group.

A CHANGING MEDIA INDUSTRY

“It’s a difficult time for the media, as our advertising revenue has fallen, our share of the pie has been gobbled up by the tech giants and journalists’ pay is shrinking, so it’s less of a dream job for young people these days,” observed the 41-year-old. He thinks that the press’s heyday is over now in Vietnam, while digital news is still seeking a business model. News websites are free since the public is not used to paying for them, while they do readily fork out for films and music. Only 2% of Vietnam+ website users have a premium subscription. Hoàng is hoping to improve these results through sponsored content on Facebook. However, the group’s key strength continues to be the quality of content offered, excluding crime, entertainment and celebrity stories. “Today, the most sensitive matters are environmental; pollution, for example, as Hanoi

is one of the world’s most polluted capitals. With COVID-19, these subjects have taken a back seat but it’s our duty to continue talking about them,” he emphasised. Yet despite everything, Hoàng refuses to be a doom-monger: “I’m committed to constructive journalism in support of the weakest, which shows government the way forward, to find solutions for the people,” he said, before drawing the interview to a close. Since he now has less leisure time, this family man enjoys matches more on screen.

“It’s a difficult time for the media, as our advertising revenue has fallen, our share of the pie has been gobbled up by the tech giants and journalists’ pay is shrinking, so it’s less of a dream job for young people these days.”

Heba Obeidat

FIGHTING FAKE NEWS AND
HATE SPEECH IN JORDAN

At just 35 years old, Heba Obeidat already has a brilliant career behind her. Having worked as a journalist, radio presenter, producer and researcher, she is now the National Coordinator for Qudra in Jordan, a project to help foster resilience among Syrian refugees across the world.



After a Master in “peace and conflict resolution” at the Hashemite University in Amman, Heba Obeidat began her career in research. She mainly took an interest in media coverage of politics in Jordan, in particular regarding refugees and women’s rights. She continued to cover these topics while working as a journalist at various Jordanian media outlets, including Radio Al-Balad and Jordan Today TV, where she hosted around a hundred debates on politics and the national economy. She also produces and presents the parliamentary podcast on the Jordanian platform Sowt. “As a journalist, I have written many articles on Syrian refugees in Jordan. One day, CFI contacted me suggesting I research the subject and I accepted,” Heba Obeidat explained. Nowadays, she coordinates the Qudra project (Qudra means “strength and resilience” in Arabic) in Jordan. With the backing of the European Union Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (known as the “Madad fund”) and the German cooperation agency, this initiative aims to support Syrian refugees. Obeidat has also worked to implement an awareness-raising campaign aiming to reduce hate speech directed at Syrian refugees in Jordan: “Videos showed Syrians and Jordanians the importance of working side by side. Journalists wrote success stories for publication in newspapers and online, shown in video format on the project’s Facebook page.”

MANY STEREOTYPES PERSIST

This is an all-important task in a country like Jordan, which is currently home to more than 1.3 million Syrian refugees, i.e. 10% of the total population, and houses the second largest refugee camp in the world, Zaatari. This has put the State under immense pressure in terms of resources and exacerbating tensions between communities, as Heba explained: “Many stereotypes persist. The most common trope is that Syrians will steal Jordanian people’s jobs. This is clearly a popular misconception as they only have access to employment in a certain number of sectors such as construction or agriculture, jobs which Jordanians often refuse to do. The operation soon became a real success, its Facebook page TogetherInJordan now has over 145,000 subscribers. This is the first step in changing people’s attitudes, as the Project Coordinator confirmed: “In the beginning, we had to face a number of negative comments, but after a year of campaigning, we have noticed a significant drop in the number of hate comments.”

ONLINE TRAINING IN FACT-CHECKING

In autumn 2019, the project entered its second phase. Against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, Qudra2 now offers online training sessions in fact-checking: “Fake news circulates just as quickly as the virus, so we are trying to educate journalists on fact-checking methods, and coverage of health issues.” This has kept Heba Obeidat very busy, whilst also dreaming about the future.

She sees herself embracing a career in political journalism at independent media outlets, even if there is still a long way to go: “As freelancers, we can’t get a press pass, since only journalists working for the government’s media outlets have a right to them. Unfortunately, there are hardly any independent media outlets in Jordan. Those that wish to remain independent have trouble doing their work properly. For example, the Chief Editor of Jo24 was arrested because he covered teacher protests in Amman.”

“Fake news circulates just as quickly as the virus, so we are trying to educate journalists on fact-checking methods.”

Saychai Phanthavong

BUILDING A GREENER FUTURE

As an editor for the magazine Lines, Saychai Phanthavong joined the Mekong: Sustainable News project in 2020. Her first video produced for the project showcases innovative farming methods in Northern Laos.



“It’s not only up to journalists to inform the general public, I think it’s everyone’s responsibility,” Saychai Phanthavong claimed. The 27-year-old Laotian graduate in architecture travelled alongside her group of volunteers to Xiangkhouang, a highland province to the north where the main occupation is farming. “We met some farmers experimenting with crop rotation,” recollected the trainee, looking serious with her round glasses and long hair tucked neatly behind her ears. “They plant corn during the first season and then switch to beans for the next season. This helps to replenish the soil, limits deforestation of new plots and the organic crops fetch a higher price, it’s win-win all round!” In her very first video, a brief report, Saychai interviewed farmers and a Chinese buyer who liked Laotian produce, which is reputedly more natural than Chinese, grown in the majesty of the lush green hills. “It was fantastic to discover the rural world from within and not just as a tourist. I found the villagers’ connection with nature very touching, and I became more aware of the environmental crisis,” reported the curious, determined young woman. “Young Laotians really enjoy video content, so I want to keep learning, to create my own videos highlighting topics that are close to my heart.”

FROM AVID READER TO CONTRIBUTOR

Coming from a family of teachers, Saychai acknowledged her good education: “My parents encouraged me to read from a very early age and they support me in everything I do.” With an affinity for writing and drawing, an artistic nature and a gift for maths, she was drawn to architecture, which combined all her interests. But she dipped her toe into the world of media a year before graduating from the National University of Laos in 2017. “We have a lot of cultural products from Thailand here in Laos, because we can read Thai and the local market is merely embryonic. I personally bought every Thai journal of architecture I could get my hands on. So when I discovered Lines, a local architecture magazine, I wanted to be part of the adventure!” she explained. Saychai started to contributing to the magazine as a student, writing editorials and articles about landmarks and exploring urban planning. “I feel that the main point of architecture and design is to deal with problems. Having spent time in the countryside, I asked myself how I could develop houses using modern materials that are adapted to their environment and comply with environmental standards,” shared the woman who worships Tadao Ando, the Japanese father of minimalist architecture.

She also claims to have been inspired by another prominent figure in modern Laotian architecture, a great aesthete and a designer of musical

instruments and typefaces: Hongkad Souvannavong. Like Souvannavong, Saychai is a jack of all trades. She plays guitar and has started making wooden furniture. “My dream is to one day create my own architecture office, giving pride of place to the media,” she concluded. We wish her the best of luck.

“Young Laotians really enjoy video content, so I want to keep learning and create my own videos highlighting topics that are close to my heart.”



22

Zeina Ramadan

BREAKING THE TABOO OF MENTAL HEALTH

A woman of many talents, Palestinian director and cultural entrepreneur, Zeina Ramadan, is on a mission to break taboo and improve representations in the Arab world.

Born into a family of Palestinian politicians, Zeina Ramadan learned about social activism at a very young age. However, she did not seek to achieve her aims through political action, preferring to harness culture, expressing her ideas through writing and film. She was initially drawn to journalism, which she studied at An-Najah National University in Nablus. It was during this time that she first came up against gender inequality in academia. “Even at university, I saw that there were some jobs that were reserved for men, while others were reserved for women. That’s when I had the idea for Taxi Girl, a kind of social experiment in which I filmed my sister driving a public taxi. Everyone expected me to fail, but I took part in a competition at school and came second. That victory gave me a lot of confidence.”

SOCIAL ISSUES IN CINEMA AND COMMITMENT

The young director developed a taste for cinema as she grasped its resonance in society. She then decided to use the medium to put across her messages and fight injustice. In the wake of Taxi Girl’s success, she was contacted by Sashat Woman Cinema. As an institution that aims to improve female representation in Palestinian cinema, they offered her an opportunity to make a second film with them. The result was Hush, a satirical short depicting a young girl who feels like she is being followed by her two neighbours, who symbolise society’s injunctions on women. She then released Sars, an experimental film recounting the difficulties of a friend as she attempted to cross the Gaza border to study abroad, which featured audio excerpts of the friends’ conversations over social media. Conveying criticism of injustice in the patriarchal society of the Arab world, these original films have a homemade feel, since Zeina acquired her editing skills on YouTube.

CULTURAL ENTREPRENEUR

Concurrently, she started working in the Palestinian creative and cultural industry, first becoming Editorial Manager at Nisaa Network, a multi-media platform for Arab women, then Project Manager for one of the biggest animation studios in Palestine, and finally Coordinator for the local Palestinian Cinema Days. These experiences inspired her to develop her country’s cultural ecosystem and reinforce its local dimension: “I applied to a United Nations project, which gave me the opportunity to participate in lots of workshops on cultural project management.”

Zeina Ramadan also satisfied her entrepreneurial streak by joining the start-up Kitab Sawti, the biggest library of audio books translated into Arabic. “I realised that culture in the Arab world wasn’t integrated into the world of innovation. Working with Kitab Sawti helped me understand how to engage an audience and how artificial intelligence can help artists. I took it all on board and I wanted to start my own project,” she recounted. No

sooner said than done, she set up the Al Feel project just a few months later. “Feel” (which means “elephant” in Arabic, a reference to the expression “an elephant in the room”, which describes the taboos no one talks about) offers narrative programmes in audio format on the subject of mental health.

“WE DON’T RECOGNISE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS HERE”

Mental health problems which are yet very prevalent in the region, being so greatly affected by conflict and war. Zeina explained: “Given the prevalence of conflict in the Middle East, many of us suffer from PTSD. I wanted to create a programme where writers could share stories on the topic of mental health.” Even if there are still too many economic and cultural barriers that prevent people from getting the help they need and talking about these problems: “We don’t recognise mental health problems here; we prefer to ignore them or put them down to personality. It remains taboo to talk about personal issues with your doctor, and, in our culture, you simply do not criticise your parents or your family. And yet, 90% of our trauma can be attributed to them.” Backed by CFI, this project will comprise 25 episodes. Zeina hopes that it will open up the debate on this subject as complex as it is controversial. In the meantime, Zeina is continuing her creative industry studies at Birkbeck, University of London, even as she plans to return to Palestine, where she dreams of developing “alternative” tourism and implementing policies to promote cultural development.

“I wanted to create a programme where writers could share stories on the topic of mental health.”

Felana Carol Rajaonarivelo

DREAMS AND FIREFLIES IN THE NIGHT

Felana Carol Rajaonarivelo, 32, is one of just a few female photographer-videographers in Madagascar. The cheerful founder of “Fireflies”, with her team of a dozen employees, captures emotions and “adds a touch of light” to each and every one of her projects.



Rachel Sahondra Ratovoarison's head is full of images of her daughter, her "little Felana": "Since her childhood, she has always been happy and sociable. We would hear her singing before she came into the house. She was very coquettish; whenever her photographer uncle visited us, she would ask him to take her photo!" Now a Malagasy photographer-videographer herself, 32-year-old Felana Carol Rajaonarivelo confirmed her mother's recollections: "Even then, I was a dreamer, full of life and curiosity. And still today, when I don't know something, I'm not ashamed to just ask." While studying for her degree in communications from the SAMIS-ESIC School of Information and Communication, Amparibe, Antananarivo, she indulged her passion for publicity photos, learning to shoot and produce. A year later, in 2012, she took a remote course dispensed by the Institut de la Photographie in Paris. The following year, her photo "Woman and rice" was one of 20 favourites selected from among 10,000 participants of the "Terre de femmes" international competition organised by the French Development Agency (AFD).

As one of few female photographers and videographers in Madagascar, paying tribute to women just comes naturally: "I'm from a modest family. My mother put her life on hold so that we could succeed. In our country, women have to work two or three times as hard to justify their place and make their mark." Against this difficult backdrop, she created "Fireflies, light your dreams", an aptly named audiovisual and events production agency in 2014: "One evening, while shooting in the middle of nowhere, I was feeling down in the dumps. I dreamed of setting up my own business to add a touch of light to the projects I liked, when the rain stopped and fireflies came out."

"PEOPLE-CENTRED SHOOTS"

Since then, requests for photos and videos have flooded in from various institutions and Felana Carol Rajaonarivelo regularly takes official photographs for famous people, such as the Secretary-General of the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF), Michaëlle Jean, at the 16th Francophonie Summit in Madagascar in 2016. The same year, Felana produced 10 profiles of influential women for the US embassy. Carole Rakotondrainibe, who manages an entrepreneurial platform, was one of the lucky people to be chosen: "During our first photo shoot, I remember this tiny woman, under 5'2", with this impressive photography equipment: her "bazooka"! She was very cheerful and chatted to me during the shoot to put me at ease. Since then, I've seen Felana and her team grow."

In 2019 and 2020, Felana Carol Rajaonarivelo took part in the third promotional campaign for the "Afrique au féminin" competition (a CFI project in partnership with Canal +): "Representing Madagascar gave me an opportunity to attend training courses in scriptwriting in Côte d'Ivoire and pro-

duction in Senegal. I also received a grant to shoot a short in Madagascar on the day-to-day life of a mother working five jobs to raise her children. Now, I am able to convince my clients to put the human aspect centre stage in institutional shoots." As the manager of a communications agency who Felana profiled, Karine Andrea Rabefaritra concluded: "Having attended a workshop at Studio Harcourt in Paris, Felana knows how to draw out emotions for the profiles, but she also knows how to make herself invisible at key moments for our business customers." Having herself become a company director with a dozen employees, "little Felana" is now an expert in the art of juggling personal and professional projects.

IN TEN YEARS'S TIME

As a photographer, videographer and owner of Fireflies, Felana Carol Rajaonarivelo juggles several hats and projects. In 2020, she produced "Inspire and be inspired", a series of profiles of day-to-day heroes "fighting for a better future", role models for young people in Madagascar. Felana also created another series, "Curves'n shadows", about curves sculpted by light, which took second prize in the Paritana 2020 competition held by the French Institute Of Madagascar, in homage to the beauty of the female body, both healthy and sick. These profiles may travel one day, as part of a touring exhibition or a book. Felana Carol Rajaonarivelo hopes that Fireflies and her young team will continue to "grow and glow at an international level".

In ten years's time, her mother, Rachel Sahondra Ratovoarison, dreams of seeing her "little princess plying her trade throughout the world". Karine Andrea Rabefaritra and Carole Rakotondrainibe, who know her in a professional capacity, hope to see her "overcome her shyness and grow beyond the borders" of Madagascar. In the future, both see her inspiring other young women and opening a visual arts school in Madagascar.

"I dreamed of setting up my own business to add a touch of light to the projects I liked."



24

Tenin Samake

FEMINIST BREAKING DOWN
TABOOS AND CLICHÉS

Aged only 25, Tenin Samake is the founder and Chief Editor of the Malian website Womanager. She promotes everyday women there, defending their rights and tackling even the most taboo subjects.

The devil is sometimes in the detail. As a young girl, Malian Tenin Samake was already protesting against everyday inequality. “At home, after eating, it was up to my sister or me to take the boys’ empty dishes to the kitchen. My uncle explained that their role was to eat and go about their business. I protested. People were sometimes shocked that a teenage girl like me would say things like this,” remembered the founder of the site Womanager, which promotes women’s achievements.

To avoid displeasing her father, Tenin opted in 2016 for a BA in Business Communication at the Higher Institute of Training and Business Management, then for a Master in Law at the Faculty of Public Law of Bamako, despite wanting to become a “journalist and writer”. But she kept her sights on her fight. “When we were students, Tenin was courageous at all times. She was already campaigning for gender equality,” recalled her friend Aminata Guindo. In 2017, Tenin Samake participated in a session at the Dakar Regional Leadership Centre of the Young African Leaders Initiative in Senegal (YALI being an initiative launched by US President Barack Obama). It was a revelation! “I met women who left me speechless, a far cry from the usual image of submissive women, unable to take charge of their own destiny.” Inspired by these role models, Tenin created a blog that same year to “meet women, give them a positive image and talk about subjects that concern them on a daily basis, such as polygamy.”

INCEST, FGM, HARASSMENT

Womanager was born. And the conscience of an activist who owns her activism. “I like to quote Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer: ‘Being a feminist is like being pregnant, either you are or you are not!’ Some people say they agree with girls going to school and working but remain convinced that they must submit to their husbands. That doesn’t make sense!” Georges Attino Coulibaly, friend, journalist and blogger, says in appreciation: “We found original pieces on the rights and the place of women in Mali, with principled positions on the Womanager blog. But Tenin does not hide behind a screen! She says the same things in real life too.”

In 2019, Tenin Samake benefitted from coaching via CFI’s Sahel Dialogue project, learning to develop online editorial projects: “It helped me refine my idea and take Womanager to a more professional level.” So the blog became a website run by a team of four people, with diversified sections covering tricky subjects in depth and without taboos, such as incest, violence against women, street harassment, female pleasure, etc. “We are breaking taboos to eradicate stereotypes. Acting as if the problem didn’t exist is often an excuse for excluding people!” the founder and Chief Editor told us. Her colleague and namesake, Tenin Nassoun Diallo, confirmed: “In Mali, it is a first to have a site dedicated to the emancipation of African women, discussing shocking themes

such as homosexuality.” Modest as ever, the Chief Editor qualifies this: “We get a lot of messages from young girls asking us for advice on various topics and encouraging us to continue, but when it comes to the authorities, there are no major changes forthcoming yet. The transitional government (Editor’s note: appointed on 5 October 2020 after the military putsch of 18 August) only has four women out of 25 ministers. That’s less than before!” More combative than ever, Tenin Samake is already laying the groundwork for a campaign against FGM, a practice still common in Mali.

IN 10 YEARS TIME

In an unstable country, with progressive and conservative forces, Tenin Samake wants to believe in a “more egalitarian Mali” with “more girls in school, more women in strategic positions in the bodies of power, administrations, large companies, the media and on the electoral roll in the future.” Her friend Aminata Guindo is convinced that Tenin, “will be a role model for young girls thanks to her website Womanager.” Her colleague, Tenin Nassoun Diallo, goes even further: “In ten years’s time, Tenin will be the new Oprah Winfrey when it comes to violence against women! Womanager might have a talk show, a digital channel and a foundation for women’s aid.” Tenin Samake hopes to have “as much positive impact” as the American star producer and presenter but above all, she wants to remain true to herself, connected to the everyday realities of society: “I hope that we will have improved the site’s content and that Womanager will be followed by even more Malians (Editor’s note: currently more than 9,000 Facebook subscribers) to foster a new way of looking at life and women.”

“I met women who left me speechless, a far cry from the usual image of submissive women, unable to take charge of their own destiny.”

Sokcheng Seang

THE BLOGGER AND YOUTH WHISPERER

The Cambodian entrepreneur behind the Wapatoa website has created an original media model where young people talk to other young people. For Mekong: Sustainable News, she set a group of budding bloggers to work, focusing on infographics.



At just 26 years old, co-founder of the Wapatoa website Sokcheng Seang has carved out her own space in the Cambodian media world. The beaming young woman, with high cheekbones framed by strands of bleached hair, grew up in a family where nobody read. “I’ve always loved reading, even though there were only two fairy-tale books in my house: I knew them by heart!” she laughed. When her family left the coastal town of Preah Sihanouk for the capital, the young girl was finally able to quench her thirst for reading by devouring copies of Korean or Chinese novels sold around schools. The arrival of the Internet ignited her curiosity: “When I got my first smartphone, I frantically searched for answers to my questions. That is where I discovered blogging.” Sokcheng created her own blog “Ms. Cheng’s Corner” in 2013, reflecting her spiritual, sensitive, quirky personality: “Blogging gave me an outlet to continue sharing the useful things I was learning.” After graduating in English and Business in 2018, she embarked on her entrepreneurial adventure that same year, following her meeting with Alix Feschotte, a French expatriate with a passion for all things digital.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A WEAPON

Together, they founded Wapatoa (“culture” in Khmer). This bilingual Khmer and English website encourages 16-25 year-olds to “think about the problems of everyday life”. The design is meticulously thought out: colourful, with bottom-to-top navigation to scroll as on Facebook, so that users can easily find their bearings, in a country where many have a smartphone but no computer. There are various sections offering content on health, education, careers, finance and the arts, in innovative formats including articles, podcasts, videos and comic strips.

“We don’t deal with social or political issues, but in a sense, personal development is shaped by politics, albeit subtly,” she wisely acknowledged. Above all, Sokcheng wants to emphasise critical thinking, goodwill and environmental awareness. “Well-informed individuals who are comfortable with themselves make a better world,” is her maxim. In just a short time, Wapatoa has gained 35,000 loyal users, clocking up three million views on Facebook in 2020. The small team shares a building in central Phnom Penh with other start-ups; a hive where young people take the time to sit down to share dishes prepared by a home cook, and assert their love of power naps. “It’s important to create an exciting, stimulating environment where people can grow”, enthused the entrepreneur. That’s what she’s aiming for with the Mekong: Sustainable News initiative.

A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN “SIT DOWN AND THINK”

Wapatoa’s collaboration with CFI is twofold. First: the creation of infographics, for example about the dengue virus or waste management. “This is the most popular format because it is accessible, there is not very much text and it helps us stand out because here, it is innovative,” she explained. The second focus is on training a group of young bloggers. The project was launched in partnership with the environmental initiative group Young Eco Ambassadors, created five years ago: “Together, we selected 10 people for a six-month training course. After an initial month of meetings with local environmental stakeholders, the team attended intensive morning sessions five days a week.” Sokcheng took on the task of teaching research and writing skills, while the Young Eco Ambassadors made their extensive address book available to the apprentice reporters. “Above all, I act as a role model to them; by showing them what I do, I empower them to develop their own writing voice, to express their opinion.” The keys to its success with young people: “I avoid judging them, telling them what’s right and wrong like adults. I put forward my point of view and take it from there.” The team has made two field trips, to a floating village on Tonlé Sap lake and to an island in the Mekong river, which provided the inspiration for articles on molluscs, the endangered giant catfish (a symbol of Khmer identity), and protected fish nesting areas. “I am surprised by how much the interns have invested in this. Young Eco Ambassador created the ‘Dek Kheut’ Facebook page (“Sit down and think”), where they shared the content produced and became contributors.”

“Well-informed individuals who are comfortable with themselves make a better world.”



26

Bunheng Southishak

LISTENING TO LAOS

Fifteen young Laotians have made videos on the environment issues facing their country for the Mekong: Sustainable News Project. This exploration of green issues was supervised by Bunheng Southishak, Director of Lao Youth Radio, a major source of support and a springboard for young Laotians.

When he was younger, BunhengSouthichak dreamed of being a businessman. Just like his mother, who ran a shop in the suburbs of the capital, where he grew up as the youngest of five siblings. But the little boy also loved the newspapers that his father, a teacher, used to bring home every evening. By dint of looking at the pictures and translating the unknown words he taught himself English. At the age of 10, Bunhengflew abroad for the first time, to the USSR and its vast snow-covered landscape, the exact opposite of his tiny tropical country. The taste for travel would never leave him. After secondary school, he studied agro-industry in Thailand, before heading to Japan for a Master in civil engineering, followed by a PhD in climate engineering. “When I finished my studies, I was tempted to live in Japan, but I missed my homeland,” the 44-year-old father confided. His small glasses give him a serious look, contrasting with the tousled hair of a K-pop crooner. On his return to Vientiane, Bunhengworked as a consultant, conducting environmental and social impact studies for the private sector, and later taught these disciplines at the university.

A PLATFORM FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In 2013, Bunhengdreamed of a fresh start. He wanted to set up his own media outlet and took an interest in radio. At that time, Laos had five conventional radio stations. The newcomer wanted to shake up the industry: “I focused on the young generation because, in Laos, we have a lot of young talent but no platform for them to express themselves.” Once he had received the necessary government approval, he founded Lao Youth Radio, in 2015, under the aegis of the Lao Youth Union, the young people’s division of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, where the station’s premises are located. The station FM 90 provides slices of news and entertainment: “Our topics range from local development to international news, educational opportunities, talk shows and advice,” he explained. Lao Youth Radio is quickly building an audience, with its Facebook page now boasting 280,000 followers.

“Anyone who’s popular in Laos comes onto our station,” Bunhengbeamed. This does not exclude older people, as the station’s motto is “For the Young and the Young at Heart”. So, what do young people in Laos aspire to? “Above all, young people in Laos have to face the challenge of unemployment; they are looking for their place in society. Young people are quite reserved, and may have little perspective when it comes to the news.” Hence the importance of real media education, especially social media, with the emergence of bloggers and YouTubers in recent years. “I want to inspire young people to do what they love, that’s what’s most important to me.”

MAKING THE MOST OF THE AGRICULTURAL POTENTIAL OF LAOS

This polyglot, who is fluent in four languages, leverages his experience to bridge the gap between local and international realities. He coordinated the Mekong: Sustainable News project, launched by CFI, which aimed to train young Laotians: “Some of them come from government radio stations or newspapers; others are civil servants in communications.” Each trainee was in charge of two subjects on the impact of climate change. This is a sensitive issue in Laos, where access to scientific data is limited. “We work with a network of NGOs that work with the government and share data and research with us,” Bunhengexplained. “We opted for video, with reports lasting 3-4 minutes, because upwards of 80% of Laotians get their news from a smartphone and only 20% use newspapers or the radio.” The participants underwent three days of training and then went out into the field, to the “green lung” jungle area in northern Laos. “For example, we produced a video on slash-and-burn farming of maize and kidney beans, meeting farmers who are learning the principles of agro-ecology,” he recounted. This experience has raised the trainees’ awareness of the Laos’ farming potential.

“I want to inspire young people to do what they love, that’s the most important thing for me.”



27

Falilatou Titi

WORKING IN THE SHADOWS TO SHINE A LIGHT

In Benin, 29-year-old Falilatou Titi likes to lurk in the shadows when investigating for her online newspaper Banouto, all the better to shine a light on the dysfunctions in the society in which she lives.

She has recently been in the spotlight though, having received the Jérôme Adjakou Badou award in 2020.

“I don’t know whether I chose journalism or journalism chose me!” joked Falilatou Titi, a 29-year-old Beninese journalist with the investigative online newspaper Banouto. A reserved student, she wondered why she would want to be in such a prominent job. Mounirou Titi, her younger brother, confirmed his sister’s discretion and modesty: “When we were children, Falilatou put up with all my whims. Even now, she remains calm and silent when offended. However, as a student elected president of a multi-activity club, Falilatou Titi found herself supervising her establishment’s newspaper and proofreading her fellow students’ articles.

Finally, she earned a degree in news photography, followed by a professional Master at ISMA, the higher institute of audiovisual professions in Cotonou. However, there was no question of switching to the other side of the camera: “Being shy, I didn’t like being a newsreader. I prefer to remain in the background, gathering and processing information.” Her fellow student Éléonore Martine Monhounso recalled: “Even for group work, Falilatou never gave up, even if it meant staying up all night! I used to call her “Never say die”! Being discreet and determined, Falilatou Titi naturally felt the appeal of writing and investigation. So she joined the very new investigative online newspaper Banouto (which means “search, investigate, dig around and uncover for the people”, in the Fon language).

Chief Editor Yao Hervé Kingbêwé was full of praise for her: “At first, I thought she would do what most women do: put in a short stint in the written press, then go back to TV. But her first few articles convinced me of her determination to break away from the usual workshop reports in the Beninese press. Falilatou is not afraid to seek out information on the ground, despite the difficulties.”

STAYING THE COURSE

At present, Falilatou Titi manages her media team on certain investigative projects. She is also on the lookout for funding and collaboration opportunities. “Banouto has improved its editorial output thanks to the CFI’s project Naila (New players in African online news),” she enthused. On a personal level, Falilatou is delighted to have been involved in the Benin Citizens’ Dialogue project: “For example, I learned the snail technique for contacting sources, starting with the most distant and moving in to the closest. This has empowered me to carry out more in-depth investigations.”

Sometimes, however, her “over-emotional” nature gets the better of her: “During my investigation into government mismanagement of the funds allocated to certain administrative documents, I felt the keen suffering of neighbourhood and village leaders, deprived of salaries and offices. With the moral support of the entire Banouto team, I came to my senses, as I had previously carried out a preliminary investigation among the aggrieved citizens.”

She was awarded the Jérôme Adjakou Badou prize in 2020 for the “best investigative journalist” in recognition of this work. Having been thrust unwillingly into the spotlight on that day, Falilatou Titi reacts with modesty: “It gives me a sense of moral satisfaction to have brought this mismanagement into the public arena, together with the poor living conditions of the neighbourhood leaders. Receiving such a prestigious award after just three years in the profession sets a new challenge for me: now I have to stay the course!” Dazzled by the spotlight, Falilatou is eager to get back to investigating in the shadows, “to bring the news to decision-makers and help improve the living conditions of our fellow citizens.”

IN TEN YEARS’S TIME

Her university friends laugh readily about it. According to Éléonore Martine Monhounso: “In ten years’s time, some of us see Falilatou as Benin’s Minister of Communication! Unlike some of us who have given up on journalism, she has stayed the course! I can see her going a long way in the profession.” Falilatou Titi rejected the suggestion of entering politics, reiterating: “I don’t like being in the limelight! Right now, I can’t imagine being anything but a journalist!” However, younger brother Mounirou Titi who knows her to be “hard working, a fighter and a perfectionist”, believes that in a few years’ time, in any event, she will have made a name for herself due to her investigations. Yao Hervé Kingbêwé, Chief Editor of Banouto and himself the recipient of the Jérôme Adjakou Badou Prize for best investigative journalist in 2017, expressed the same desire: “When we launched our media outlet, we had no resources, but Falilatou stayed with us. She loves reporting! In ten years’s time, she may have won six or seven more awards for her work!”

“Receiving such a prestigious award after just three years in the profession sets a new challenge for me: now I have to stay the course!”

—

Olesia Tytarenko

THE FUTURE OF INDEPENDENT
JOURNALISM IN UKRAINE

Olesia Tytarenko has become Assistant Chief Editor of the newsroom at UA:PBC (Suspilne), the Ukrainian public television group that she hopes will embody the future of independent journalism in her country.



Born in Ukraine into a family of doctors, Olesia Tytarenko nevertheless chose another path for herself very early on, turning to journalism. At the age of 16, while still at school, she was already covering cultural news as a freelance writer for a regional newspaper. She pursued this passion at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv where she obtained her BA in Journalism with First Class Honours. “I was always particularly interested in writing and literature-related subjects at school. I wavered for a long time between law and journalism, but my wish to express myself and help was stronger, so I chose journalism.”

During her studies, Olesia completed many internships in Ukrainian radio and television, the parliamentary newspaper of Ukraine and some online media outlets. As she was finishing her degree, revolution broke out in Ukraine in November 2013, following the Ukrainian government’s decision not to sign a long-discussed organisation agreement with the European Union. Three months of mass demonstrations, later remembered as the Euromaidan revolution, led the President Viktor Yanukovich to flee to Russia after shootings and the death of several dozen demonstrators. A few days after the establishment of a new government in Kyiv, the Russia army invaded Crimea and annexed the peninsula after a referendum which was not recognised by the international community, triggering a major diplomatic crisis.

“I DISCOVERED REAL FIELD JOURNALISM”

This proved to be a political and personal turning point for this fledgling journalist who had to learn about reporting in an emergency on the fly: “Before the revolution, Ukraine was a peaceful country and we young journalists were not ready to cover such events. We were used to covering official visits and cultural exhibitions. When war broke out in the Donbas region, we all had to change tack very quickly. I did not know how to work in such tough conditions; I had to learn to write quickly, to bring back good-quality sound and images without technical equipment. This was how I discovered how real reporting differed from writing up reports in my little bedroom.”

Determined to broaden her horizons, Olesia left to complete her Master in France, where she studied the administration of cultural activities at Toulouse 1 University Capitole. At that time, her interest shifted to legal journalism and international affairs. Back in Ukraine, she became the correspondent for the Russian-language newsroom of Radio France Internationale (RFI), where she regularly covers legal cases such as that of former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko: “I noticed that I lacked some knowledge about legal procedures and stakeholders and I had to find ways to fill those gaps.”

She then applied to the 6-month training course in “Justice Journalism” organised by CFI in Ukraine via Pravo Justice, an EU-backed project to support justice reform in Ukraine. This training programme gives budding legal jour-

nalists a opportunity to participate in workshops and master classes. They also meet and discuss with specialists in the judicial system and media professionals for insider insights into the system: “I remember meeting very interesting speakers, such as the representative of the High Anti-Corruption Court of Ukraine and the French journalist Pascale Robert-Diard, who reports on legal matters for the newspaper Le Monde. Now, when I cover court cases, I look at them not only as a journalist but also as an expert who understands the system and the role of a trial within the whole.”

Today, Olesia works as Assistant Chief Editor of the newsroom at UA:PBC, aka Suspilne (meaning “Public”), the national public broadcaster in Ukraine, which is in fact a large broadcasting corporation with TV channels, radio stations and digital media outlets. It has been undergoing major reform since 2017, as UA:PBC aims to establish itself as the Ukrainian equivalent of the BBC. “In Ukraine, the reporting situation remains complicated, even though things have improved since the Revolution of Dignity (following the Euromaidan protests). Most media outlets are owned by oligarchs whose interests are to create their own, financially-profitable media reality. At Suspilne, we have a great team of editors who have already worked for foreign media or have a significant experience in top-quality journalism. I believe it is important for the public to understand the importance of journalists and their protection. As for politicians, they must realise that journalists are not propagandists in the pay of those in power.”

“Journalists are not propagandists in the pay of those in power.”

Amadou Wangre

A VILLAGE MAN AND PROUD OF IT!

Amadou Wangre is the national coordinator of the AMR (Rural World Association), based in northern Burkina Faso. Village life and values have always guided his actions. Nowadays, he is working hand-in-hand with local authorities and media to improve local governance.



“My Dad was a great farmer. In our village, (Editor’s note: in the Centre-East region of Burkina Faso) all the poor people came at harvest time to help themselves to the ‘old man’s’ millet at home. My father always told me that work never killed anyone. This was his greatest gift to me.” As the national coordinator of the AMR (Rural World Association) since 2012, Amadou Wangre is now approaching the age of 50 and has been marked for life by this legacy. “At primary school, he was a good, hard-working boy, not at all unruly! He still works a lot today, so much so that I sometimes worry about his health!” recounted Cécile Balima, a cousin almost 10 years his senior. “He is tireless! We sometimes struggle to keep up with him! The young people fresh out of university who are with us feel the pressure, but in return they do receive valuable intellectual credentials,” confirmed David Worokuy, who has been working with Amadou at the AMR for five years.

Amadou Wangre is self-taught, and has always set himself high standards even as a child. He was already working as a primary school teacher when he earned his baccalaureate as a private candidate. He then studied, sometimes remotely, for a Master in sociology, a second Master in political science and a DESS (6-year diploma) specialising in local development at the University of Ouagadougou: “My studies shaped my understanding of citizen behaviour, pinpointing their needs and rolling out initiatives to fulfil these.”

DEVELOPMENT IS NOT A ONE-MAN-SHOW

In 1994, he created the AMR with some others from the Centre-East region. Now based in Gourcy in the north of Burkina Faso, the organisation primarily targets young people and women. Hastened by decentralisation, the structure started specialising in local governance: “We work with media outlets for greater visibility, as well as to ensure that the government is aware of local problems. We work closely with the decentralised state services, but we stay out of party politics.” As a result, the association now has about 40 agents, almost 100 active members and hundreds of beneficiaries of its initiatives in around 50 municipalities across Burkina Faso.

Since 2018, the AMR has been working with CFI via the Open Government Project in French-speaking Africa (PAGOF) to align budgetary data and encourage citizen participation. Amadou explained: “Before this project, we were already involved in dialogue, asking questions on behalf of the community regarding the management of the municipal budget (Editor’s note: National Action Plans 2017-2019). Development is not a one-man-show; it needs synergy in effort, as well as transparency, so that citizens can act in favour of development. PAGOF has increased our visibility and helped us extend our action to other municipalities.” All of this has further strengthened the roots of the AMR national coordinator who is more than ever a village man

and proud of it: “Even though the city is the centre of business, my natural habitat is the rural world! I would like to develop social cohesion and citizen participation in rural areas.”

IN TEN YEARS’S TIME

With her younger cousin, Cécile Balima has learned to be careful: “He always springs surprises! He is not lacking in initiative and builds to a crescendo!” So, in ten years’s time, she imagines Amadou Wangre “having an impact on various municipalities in Burkina Faso through AMR and the training it provides.” The man himself clarifies: “We currently operate in about 50 municipalities. In the near future, we want to cover all 351 municipalities nationwide.” In the medium term, the AMR even aims to operate across the sub-region, “because 90% of the problems of West African societies are linked to management difficulties. It is up to us to develop a new model of local governance.” In four or five years’ time, Amadou Wangre wants to write a thesis on this very subject, to leverage his experience and submit it to intellectual criticism. New opportunities may then arise, but the current national coordinator of the AMR promises that he will continue to “support” his beloved association. Nephew Landry Wendsomdé Wangre, who worked with him at the AMR for three years, predicted: “My uncle was a primary school teacher and later a secondary school teacher, and he has always liked to share his knowledge. After his thesis, he will probably end up in higher education and may well encourage young people to lead the association.”

“My natural habitat is the rural world! I would like to develop social cohesion and citizen participation in rural areas.”



30

Rachid Assade Zongo

A CHIEF EDITOR LISTENING
TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Rachid Assade Zongo, 32, is the Chief Editor of Jeunes Wakat, a constructive, citizen-centred radio programme designed and produced by and for young people from various regions of Burkina Faso.

“As a child, Rachid would not get angry easily. He preferred to keep quiet rather than reacting,” recalled Abdoulaye Ouédraogo, a close family friend. Aged 32, the current Chief Editor of the radio programme Jeunes Wakat (Editor’s note: “Young People’s Time” in English) in Burkina Faso, Rachid Assade Zongo, explained: “I was wary of strangers because my father died when I was 14. Raised by my mum and uncles, I had to fight for myself, to get where I am today.”

At secondary school, Rachid overcame his shy nature and opened up to several activities in various organisations: literary exhibitions and, already, a radio programme for young people: “As a commentator, I spoke about our schooling, in particular. I liked to share useful knowledge with others. After secondary school, Rachid Assade Zongo graduated in law from the University of Ouagadougou, but in the meantime he never stopped broadcasting and writing for young people in the Burkina media. He is still a member of various specialist organisations, especially the National Youth Coordination for the Environment and Climate (CONAJEC). “Young people are sometimes seen as the future of a family and a country. It is normal to pay special attention to them! Tomorrow, I will be proud to say that I helped to build them!” As a young writer and philosopher, Dobi Parfait Maré is close to the Burkina French-speaking Commission, like Rachid. He observed: “Rachid has invited me onto his programmes a lot. He is interested in reading, youth education, activism and leadership. Jeunes Wakat is interesting because it presents young role models and deals with issues that affect them directly.”

RADIO, THE IDEAL MEDIA FORMAT

Since July 2019, Rachid Assade Zongo has worked as Chief Editor of this programme in French and the national languages of the Burkina union of free audiovisual media (UNALFA), via CFI’s MediaSahel project: “Our various segments, such as ‘Portrait’ (inspiring person or group), ‘The Facebook journalist’ (humour), ‘Let’s read!’, ‘The coach’s opinion’ (contacts) and ‘Vox pop’, were created in response to requests from young listeners. Listeners can also react during the interactive part of the programme. In this way, we too learn about the realities on the ground, which differ from city to city and region to region in our country. I also appreciate having a young team that is dedicated to the task!” A team that includes a dozen people in the central newsroom, a dozen correspondents and 24 presenters from 24 partner radio stations in Burkina Faso. “Rachid lets us speak first, then he speaks up. But he also knows how to impose himself and make decisions, for example, when choosing subjects for the programmes,” Maazou Ibriga, Community Manager at Jeunes Wakat reported. The programme’s Editorial Coordinator Aïssata Sankara sees development at both individual and collective level: “Recently, Rachid has been very involved in organising his

team and programme content. He initially called on me for a lot of help, but the team members are gradually learning to work independently. They have understood what to do and how to do it.” And Rachid Assade Zongo and his young colleagues won’t be stopping there. “Jeunes Wakat has been a disruptive force in radio, because it’s the first-ever show with this kind of format. Nowadays, many different stations have promised to broadcast our programmes, as well as creating their own.” This is good news for the passionate Chief Editor, who is more than ever convinced that “radio is the most appropriate media format for reaching out to young people throughout Burkina Faso and empowering them to become themselves.”

IN TEN YEARS’S TIME

Rachid Assade Zongo is open to all future opportunities: “In ten years’s time, I would like to still be in the thick of things, as a radio or TV journalist or international correspondent, but also to learn and share as a trainer for CFI or as a manager of a media outlet.” Charlemagne Abissi, Executive Director of UNALFA and Rachid’s manager, has encouraged him to develop his potential: “In the future, I can see him being fully able to manage a large newsroom or train other journalists”. Those Rachid Assade Zongo now coaches at Jeunes Wakat also believe in the future of their boss: “Rachid likes a job well done. He may lead an even larger team tomorrow or take on project management,” predicted Tiona Sanogo, the programme’s Production Manager. Wendpayengde Paule Gwladys Ouédraogo, a friend, summed up: “In ten years’s time, Rachid will be an excellent journalist because he is humble and open to criticism, so he is always learning.”

“Radio is the most appropriate media format for reaching out to young people throughout Burkina Faso and empowering them to become themselves.”

EDITOR

Lou Mamalet

Dorra Ben Abdelkader, Wedad Albadwi,
Ahmed Baider, Lina Chawaf,
Mohamed Taieb Chmengui,
Lo'ai Hazem, Tatiana Kozak, Heba Obeidat,
Zeina Ramadan, Olesia Tytarenko.

Emmanuel de Solère Stintzy

Carole Ambassa, Virginie Améké, Gaston Bonheur
Sawadogo, Ibrahima Benjamin Diagne, Moussa Diallo,
Amélie Gue, Abdoul-Razak Idrissa,
Solange Shagayo Kagombe, Ramatou Baoua N'gobi,
Felana Carol Rajaonarivelo, Latifa Salissou Hassane,
Tenin Samake, Falilatou Titi, Amadou Wangre,
Rachid Assade Zongo.

Éléonore Sok

Soklim Ky, Hoàng Nhật Nguyên, Saychai Phanthavong,
Bunheng Southishak, Sokcheng Seang.

CFI extends the warmest of thanks
to all media stakeholders and the friends
and family members who agreed
to contribute to these portraits.

CHIEF EDITOR

Astrid Robin

ILLUSTRATIONS

Hélène Bléhaut

GRAPHIC DESIGN

La Confiserie, Rennes

PRINTER

Media Graphic, Rennes

EDITING

CFI - 62, rue Camille Desmoulins
92130 Issy-les-Moulineaux, France

LEGAL DEPOSIT

February 2022

This copy is not for sale.

