

Revealed: How BBC.com's doing African digital news justice

 By Leigh Andrews

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Who better to provide news from the continent, for the continent, than the news service with more reporters in Africa than any other broadcaster? Here's what to expect from the new Africa-centric offering from bbc.com...

BBC World Service's latest online development is sure to put a smile on the face of English-speaking internet users on the continent. With the launch of the Africa edition of the bbc.com website, you'll be able to access more African news stories, features and video on the front page, or visit the dedicated bbc.com/Africa section for Africa news all the time.

I got the scoop on this and the many other ways the BBC World Service is covering Africa from BBC Digital Development Editor, Dmitry Shishkin.

■ ***Firstly, why is BBC World Service expanding into Africa? What spurred this new digital investment?***



Shishkin: The BBC appreciates that great social and technological changes are happening on the African continent. Our traditional penetration on radio is strong, TV is growing significantly.

BBC Digital Development Editor, Dmitry Shishkin.

Digital has been growing too, especially on the most relevant platform for the local audiences - mobile - where we have grown 40% year-on-year.

However, with this constantly evolving medium, we need to make our digital offering even stronger and our agenda more varied in order to stay relevant. The BBC is committed to catering for the needs of African audiences, irrespective of technical platform.

On digital, news is a service, like the many other services within your phone, and we want to continue being the best in class in Africa. We are also providing more space to cover a wide range of themes that interest local audiences like sport, health, tech, arts and business.

■ ***Is it just English-speaking internet users that will benefit?***

Shishkin: This particular initiative is aimed at English speakers, but we do have massive plans for our language services. BBC Hausa service, for instance, has been "mobile-first" for many years now. When Western audiences were still very much occupied with desktop, Nigerians, Kenyans and Tanzanians were consuming BBC content on their mobile phones. That's why our African language services, such as Hausa, Swahili, Afrique, Somali and Gahuza in Kinyarwanda/Kirundi, were the first editorial teams to benefit from our responsive-design product work - their sites became optimised for mobile much earlier than others. They have been practicing 'mobile- first' ways of writing for several years now and we can clearly

see the benefit. Editorially they share content a lot, the services undertake joint newsgathering tasks and multi-lingual projects, benefitting larger audiences. This also enables us to share best practice on digital transformation and the way we tell stories on new platforms across all of our services.

■ ***Elaborate more on the African news stories, features and video that'll be included.***

Shishkin: It's important for us to showcase the best of our African stories and reporting on the bbc.com homepage - that's why we are not only going to show the main African headlines, but also link to the best features and videos of the day, to ensure we have breadth and depth. Of course Africans want global news, sport and other content from the BBC, but it was imperative for us to make sure we have relevant regional African content in there, too. We are leveraging our presence in 48 African countries, with our reporters, correspondents and producers building digital delivery into their work. This means that they can contribute meaningfully to digital in the same way they have been doing for radio and TV. On digital, everything is measurable and quantifiable, so we are able to be nimble, change our approach in one area if it's not working, or build on things that are really popular. This could be anything from the duration of a video or audio clip, to how long a feature or article is, or how deep into a page a user can go.

■ ***Talk us through the significant enhancements we can expect in the bbc.com/Africa dedicated section.***

Shishkin: The entire BBC News website will soon be fully responsive, and we want bbc.com/Africa to become the most important single digital destination for all the best African content BBC has to offer. We already provide a mixture of news, features and video, but we are also going to showcase picture galleries, links to radio programmes, podcasts and special reports. The BBC is committed to covering Africa in a very significant way in the new digital age and vital to that is our network of correspondents, reporters and producers across Africa.

■ ***How did the BBC come to have more reporters in Africa than any other broadcaster?***

Shishkin: This is very simple: BBC has been covering Africa for a long time - many decades, in fact. Our connection with the continent is in our DNA - proportionally the continent represents the largest chunk of our global audience reach. We understand Africa better than any other international broadcaster, because our staff there live and breathe the stories of their communities as well as offering global context.

■ ***Tell us about effectively growing a mobile audience in Africa.***

Shishkin: It's a combination of things. As I mentioned, responsive design and mobile-first ways of working are important. When we embarked on producing our mobile strategy, we knew that editors needed to understand and adapt the way they worked to reflect the changing needs of audiences. Writing styles have changed too - instead of ten 400-word stories a day, our mobile audience prefers 20 stories of 200 words each.

In the world of mobile, it's important to pay particular attention to how images look on smaller devices. Also, it's important to think about how headlines and promos are written. We train our staff extensively in how to report for mobile and using mobile devices. Social plays a huge part, as generally social and mobile behaviour go hand in hand, so chat apps are also becoming an important platform for our output. A recent example is the BBC Ebola Whatsapp service giving West Africans advice, news and relevant information about the fight against the virus. We see huge opportunities for news on that platform.



■ ***We can't forget social media -explain how the BBC gives a voice to Africa's massive online audience via dedicated space on these platforms.***

Shishkin: Social media is about pushing and pulling. You've got to involve users in conversation, gauge their opinion and generally do all sorts of things you are not able to do with your website and mobile audiences. But social is also about pushing the boundaries a little, trying new formats, new approaches to reach larger groups of people that are not our traditional audiences. It's very important, so we are trying new ideas constantly. For example, our new satire segment, [What's Up Africa](#) is getting 10 times bigger audiences on our [Facebook](#) page than on our website - demonstrating how different audiences, on different platforms have different expectations. But it is a clear signal that we need to be where our audiences are. Another important aspect of being on social media is social newsgathering - finding eye witnesses, experts and following stories. BBC Trending on [Twitter](#), ([#BBCtrending](#); [@BBCtrending](#)), which explains the stories the world is sharing on social media in a weekly [radio programme](#) and a regular [blog](#), is also a very successful example of this. We're also on [Google Plus](#), [Instagram](#), [Soundcloud](#) and [YouTube](#).

Seems the BBC really has got Africa covered!

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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