

# United Nations Association of Greater Boston

Speech by [Dr. Mimi Goss](#), September 30, 2006

I'm a movie buff and I believe it's no coincidence that my two favorite films this year were from South Africa: *Tsotsi*, which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, and *Max and Mona*, one of the funniest movies I've ever seen.

*Tsotsi* concerns a young street thug who by mistake finds a baby. Caring for the baby, he discovers his own humanity and begins to heal from his own tragic childhood. *Max and Mona* is about a handsome young man from a village who travels to Johannesburg for university – with Mona, a goat, in tow.

Both movies were produced by the fledgling South African film industry, *Max and Mona* for \$1 million. They tackle Africa's huge problems – poverty, hunger, AIDS, corruption, environmental destruction. More important, however, they offer fresh, unexpected looks at the world. They show how much creativity, with little money and lots of intelligence and imagination, is emerging out of Africa.

I do communications trainings in Africa. I have conducted trainings in eight nations, a ninth through a digital videoconference from here, and I have visited three others. I have worked in the east, south, west and north of the continent. I train government officials, journalists and heads of NGO's and civil society groups on how to work in a free press. We discuss how a free press is vital for a society to have a lively dialogue. I work for the State Department and a business client.

The World Bank found in a study that the greater the freedom of the press in a nation, the greater level of development. We discuss in our trainings that government officials can't read a speech and call that a news conference. They need to take questions from reporters. And reporters can't just print rumors and their political opinions and call that news. They need to get facts.

Many African journalists work for the government media or newspapers owned by political parties. But even one reporter who works for a government-owned TV station in Botswana said she gets doors slammed in her face. Some journalists in Niger cannot read or write. I didn't realize you could be a journalist and be illiterate. But they are smart radio journalists who remember what people say in an interview or record it on cassette.

One of the main themes we discuss in the trainings is that we live in an Internet world. People have less tolerance for officials who tell them what to do. Even in remote villages, one person will have access to the Internet or satellite T or a cell phone. People can see what's happening. They want to be part of a dialogue.

In trainings with government officials, we often do mock news conferences where the officials play the roles of reporters. Usually, officials who fear the press the most make the toughest reporters. We always laugh about that. And when journalists play the roles of officials, they often say afterward, that was really tough to stand in front of all these reporters.

Here are some examples of best practices by government officials and journalists with whom I have worked:

(Holds up white T-shirt with publicity on the front and back.) This is a T-shirt from the Swaziland police department. Swaziland is a kingdom with a lot of the challenges of a monarchy. However, I talked with people I trust in Swaziland who say citizens respect the police.

You can see that this T-shirt serves a lot of purposes. On the front, you have the logo from the Police Department and the logo of the Total petroleum company, which paid for the T-shirts. On the back is the sign, "REFLECTIVE CLOTHING WILL MINIMIZE ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS."

I showed these to officials in Malawi, a very poor country, and suggested they could do something similar. They said, hey, the Swazis have a lot of money. I said, but they got a rich oil company to sponsor the campaign. A few months later, the Malawians told me they did a similar campaign and greatly reduced road accidents.

Here's another example of a magazine from the Swazi police. The cover emphasizes community policing and has a photograph with a lot of people in it. In trainings, we talk about getting photos with many people in them. Everyone in the photo will want to see a copy of your publicity, and all their relatives and friends will want to see it. Photos show citizens they are part of a national dialogue.

(Holds up newspapers.) Here are newspapers from Togo, a poor country struggling for democracy. The president, a dictator, died recently and instead of the speaker of parliament becoming president, according to law, the president's son took office. Elections were held and he was elected president, but many observers called the vote a fraud. The brave editor of this newspaper said he believes he will keep himself out of danger by being open with his criticism of the government. I hope he's right. At a training in Togo, one journalist told me he had just been let out of jail.

Another example of positive, forward-thinking communications is a little radio station in Botswana, where I had the favorite radio interview of my career. Two young reporters, a woman and a man, interviewed me during the morning news drive show. They were smart, hip, funny and extremely well informed about communications issues in Botswana. After we did the interview, another young reporter walked in. He had dreadlocks, a cap, and baggy pants. He reminded me of my son's roommate. I thought, what's he going to do? He looked like he might rap a song. He sat down, leaned up to the microphone and in a perfect BBC school of journalism accent said, "Good morning.... Heah's the news."

One of my strongest memories about the positive effect of communications in Africa is from my first trip. In 2001, I went to Rwanda and worked with Women as Partners for Peace in Africa training women leaders from Kenya, Sudan, South Africa, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda. It was 7 years after the genocide in Rwanda. People were visibly still in shock.

I stayed at the hotel known in the film as Hotel Rwanda. Its real name is Hôtel des Milles Collines, Hotel of a Thousand Hills. Rwanda's nickname is Land of a Thousand Hills. Every day I would look at the beautiful pool. I love to swim, but I knew that during the genocide, people had drunk the water in the pool.

The last night I was there, I thought, I'm going to swim in this pool. I went down and a young lifeguard was playing on a laptop computer. He reminded me of my son or any young person, who, when you put a new piece of equipment in front of them, just wants to know what it does. If it does something useful, great, but mostly they want to have fun.

I asked him how he liked it. He said it was a guest's who had let him use it. But the young man, who was very polite, was not particularly interested in talking with me. He wanted to see what the computer could do.

The young man with the laptop made me realize that technology is changing everything. And with technology and a global marketplace, African nations are going to come into their own. People are very entrepreneurial in the nations I have visited. One problem is that English and French-speaking nations do not communicate well, even when they live next door to each other. They need to talk and do business together. Another problem is government officials and journalists who work for political parties often support entire extended families with their salaries, so it's hard to end corruption. But the more business that gets conducted in Africa, the more people in extended families will make their own money.

You – Africans and people from nations outside of Africa – have a lot you can teach people in Africa. You can be of tremendous help. You can also change your life. Teach what you know. And learn from people in Africa what they know.

Thank you