

Africa finally gets to tell its story - Africa.com founder Teresa Clarke

 By Herman Manson: @marklives

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[Teresa Clarke](#) is visiting South Africa as an international judge at the [Bookmarks Awards](#) taking place this Thursday, 9 November 2011, in Cape Town. The Bookmarks, an initiative of the Digital Media and Marketing Association (DMMA), awards local digital marketing and publishing efforts.



Clarke, a former MD in the investment banking division of Goldman Sachs & Co, is the chairman and CEO of [Africa.com](#), the company she launched in 2010. The media play already serves nearly three million page views per month.

Clarke received a bachelor's degree in economics, cum laude, from Harvard College, an MBA from Harvard Business School and a JD from Harvard Law School. Africa.com is headquartered in New York and has offices in Johannesburg, Lagos and Nairobi.



Teresa Clarke, chairman and CEO of Africa.com and 2011 international Bookmarks judge

■ *How do you see the Internet/mobile Internet contributing to the human and democratic development in Africa?*

Teresa Clarke: Information is power. As we have seen during the Arab Spring events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Africans are using the power of the internet to tell their stories to the outside world in real time and thereby put pressure on repressive regimes to change.

SaharaReporters.com - a Web site devoted to rooting out corruption in Nigeria - is another example of the internet driving change. The founder of SaharaReporters.com, Omoyele Sowore, has organised an army of citizen journalists who are tracking the activities of corrupt political and business leaders. His widely-read reports have led to trials and jail terms for some officials and his influence has helped create a number of other similar organisations. 100Reporters.com, for example, was launched on October 31st by several former New York Times reporters, who are attempting to emulate Sowore's techniques and success at rooting out corruption all around the

world.

■ *Most of the users on Africa.com live outside the continent - what is drawing your readership to content relating to the continent?*

Clarke: Africa.com is creating compelling original content and aggregating the content of a growing number of best-in-class partners.

Africa.com has created the first online listing of all the museums on the African continent. Our daily blogs cover a range of topics, from President Obama meeting with young African leaders in the White House to an analysis of reasons why so many African countries celebrated a half-century of independence in 2010 to the excellent work that a number of foundations and NGOs are doing on the African continent.

Recently, for example, Africa.com posted three pieces about the work that the Voss Foundation is doing in Liberia and DRC, digging wells and bringing fresh, clean water, better sanitation and dignity to large numbers of people.

Africa.com has partnered with Harvard University's Committee on African Studies, McKinsey & Company, the Brookings Institution's Africa Growth Initiative, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Council on Foreign Relations, Foreign Affairs Magazine, Freedom House, Foreign Policy and Hand/Eye Magazines, as well as CNBC in Africa and Africa Style Daily. Our goal is to provide one-stop shopping for readers around the world who are interested in the latest business, political, cultural and travel news about the 54 countries on the African continent.

■ You have a deals aspect to your site - do you source a lot of products from Africa and, if so, how do you go about finding these and ensuring capacity and consistent quality?

Clarke: [Africa.comDEALS](#) is a new venture. The current DEAL offers a ... 68% discount on a case of wine produced by indigenous people in South Africa. The wine has been imported by Heritage Link Brands. Our first deal was for heavily discounted tickets on Arik Air, a Nigerian-based airline. Future deals will offer discounts on goods produced by women in Rwanda.

We find these deals through our network of business and philanthropic contacts. Our specific goal is to tap into the African diaspora marketplace by offering products created by Africans for Africans and anyone who's passionate about Africa. We carefully vet our vendors and only work with partners whose quality and brand we know will serve our users well.

■ Do you source local content or is it mostly produced from the States?

Clarke: Africa.com ranks first, after Wikipedia, on Google searches for the search term "Africa." If you think about who would go to Google and search for the word "Africa," it is not likely to be an African. For this reason, in these first 18 months or so of our operations, we have developed a site to serve the needs of our organic users who come primarily from the US, and to some degree, Europe and Asia.

As we look ahead, we will have to work hard to get African visitors, and will have to develop relevant and compelling content for Africans. We plan to extend our presence on the continent, and will be setting up operations on the ground in Africa in 2012. We look forward to sourcing more African content as we move forward and expect that, in five years, almost all of our content will be created in, or sourced from, Africa.

■ How concerned are you about media regulation around Africa and how it is used against especially investigative journalists?

Clarke: The Africa.com staff is well aware of the attacks on journalists in various African countries and routinely publishes pieces produced by the Africa programme officer of the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#). As I said in the first answer about the hugely important role of the media, especially online media, in driving democratic change, information is power. Access to such information should never be impeded by government regulations.

■ Your model relies in part on advertising revenue. How are brands responding to Africa.com?

Clarke: Africa.com increasingly offers brands a one-stop shop for speaking to an African-oriented digital audience. The market is highly fragmented and, in general, global brands seeking a pan-African audience must work with East African, West African, Southern African, and Northern African sites. Africa.com makes it easy to speak to the continent.

■ What is your initial impression of the quality of the Bookmarks 2011 entries?

Clarke: The South African digital community is very sophisticated and especially creative. Choosing the winners in each category has been a hard job, because there were so many compelling entries for each category. One of the entries, a SA help site for an internationally manufactured product, has found followers from several other countries in Europe and Asia, because the users of the product in those countries find the SA site to be more informative.

■ Did you notice any specific trends that stood out for you in the entries you judged?

Clarke: One trend we noticed, among the publisher entries, was the increasing number and importance of mobile sites. As more Africans come online, they do so on mobile devices to a great extent, and we expect to see much more growth in mobile Internet connectivity in the future, and hence more and more content being developed for mobile applications.

The [Bookmarks Awards](#) takes place on Thursday evening, 10 November. Remember to sign up for the [workshops](#) being held in Johannesburg today, Tuesday 8 November and in Cape Town on Wednesday 9 November. The Bookmarks are

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The inaugural Vodacom Social Media Journalist of the Year in 2011, Herman Manson (@marklives) is a business journalist and media commentator who edits industry news site www.marklives.com. His writing has appeared in newspapers and magazines locally and abroad, including Bizcommunity.com. He also co-founded *Brand* magazine.

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