



“Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

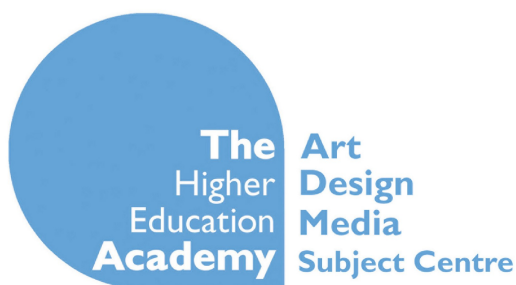
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Media Corporatism: Whither Journalistic Values?

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Introduction

There has been a remarkable proliferation of the media with attendant growth in press freedom in Kenya in the last 15 or so years. Despite the positive developments however, there is a simmering disquiet among discerning media watchers that the gains achieved have been systematically eroded by growing intolerance of editorial autonomy by government and public officials who seem disconcerted by the increasing journalistic disapproval of the quality of governance. In the last three years alone, government mandarins considered agents of change only five years ago have become increasingly autocratic (Wrong, 2005; Murunga and Nasong'o, 2006, 2007; Nyabuga, 2006a, 2006b; Barkan, 2007; Cooke, 2007) and concomitantly intolerant of vociferous media and public criticism of their style of leadership and other misdemeanours. Whilst some formal mechanisms for controlling journalistic productions like legislations have been introduced, the most recent being a contentious Media Bill,¹ informal pressures have been employed in efforts to silence the censure of government excesses, unaccountable practices, and poor governance.

¹ The government has recently published a controversial Media Bill that requires journalists to disclose their sources. The contentious bill contains various clauses, of which 38 (4), the most offending, reading: 'When a story includes unnamed parties who are not disclosed and the same becomes the subject of a legal tussle as to who is meant, then the editor shall be obliged to disclose the identity of the party or parties referred to.' Kenyan journalists accompanied by civil society activists on 15 August 2007 took to the streets to demand the president reject the bill on the grounds that it was faulty and would impede press freedom. An editorial in *The Standard* on 16 August 2007 read in part that: 'The media play a watchdog role, keeping the Government, Parliament, Judiciary, business and society in check. To do this effectively, they need no fetters'. In an article in the same newspaper, David Ohito reported that *The Standard* Groups chief operating officer, Paul Wanyagah saying that "The public's right to know is the core of a free press. Media's commitment to truth and its role as the watchdog of the society would be hampered by that clause, we ask to be spared from it. ... This amendment is asking the media to blow whistles on whistleblowers or face unspecified legal action." Similar sentiments were aired elsewhere with the Reporters Without Borders saying the bill would have 'disastrous consequences for Kenyan democracy'. The bill is yet to be translated into law as it requires a presidential assent before becoming one. Following a concerted protests, the country's attorney general, Amos Wako, conceded the bill was flawed and asked that it be redrafted. For more on the bill see, for example, Ohito, David (2007 'Save media from bad law, Standard asks President', *The Standard* [online], 4 August. Available from <http://www.eastandard.net/hm_news/news.php?articleid=1143972356> ; and, *The Standard* (editorial) (2007) 'Returning Bill to House not a solution enough', *The Standard* [online], 16 August. Available from <http://www.eastandard.net/hm_news/news_s.php?articleid=1143972946>. Mwaniki, Mike and Masibo, Kennedy (2007) 'Journalists take to the streets', *The Nation* [online], 16 August. Available from <http://www.nationmedia.com/dailynation/nmgcontententry.asp?category_id=1&newsid=104568> Websites accessed 19 August 2007.

This paper argues that although journalism in Kenya plays a vital role as a public ‘watchdog’ against malpractices particularly corruption, and mismanagement of public affairs, journalists and the media have been dogged by credibility problems due to numerous malpractices of their own. Using recent media examples, this paper considers the effects of commercial or corporate, covert and overt, formal and informal pressures exerted on the media, and their consequences upon journalistic values.

The Growth of Media in Kenya: Gains and Challenges

Despite recent and incessant assaults on press freedom in Kenya, the country’s media remains one of the most vibrant in Africa. This is a consequence of many factors including the ability of the media to withstand formal and informal pressures particularly from the government and those in power, and editorial autonomy in a relatively stable but nonetheless fluid media environment.

The reintroduction of political pluralism in Kenya plus other political reforms in 1991 birthed positive development for the media. Alongside the growing number of print and broadcast media outlets, major gains in press freedom have been made since then. Kenya now has what could be considered a ‘robust’ media with several magazine titles, newspapers, radio, and television stations. The country is home to six national newspapers, including the *Daily*, and *Sunday Nation*, the highest circulating daily and Sunday sister newspapers, and *The Standard* and its sister publication *Sunday Standard*. There are also *Nation’s* sister publications, the weekly *The East African* and the only Swahili-language daily *Taifa Leo*. Others include: *Kenya Times* which is owned by the KANU party, and *The People Daily* owned by opposition politician Kenneth Matiba. In addition, there are now at least 10 radio stations in Kenya including the state owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) with services in English, Swahili and 15 other indigenous languages. KBC also operates Metro FM and Coro FM (a Kikuyu-language station). Other radio stations in the country include Capital FM, East FM (targeting Nairobi’s Asian listeners), Easy FM, Kiss FM, Kameme FM (for Kikuyu speakers in Nairobi and the central highlands), Radio Citizen (runs Kikuyu-language Inooro FM, Luo-language Radio Ramogi and the Kalenjin broadcasting station Rehema Radio). There is also Kass FM which

broadcasts to Kalenjin listeners. Liberalisation of the media has also increased the number of television stations broadcasting in Kenya. The country is now home to at least seven television stations. These are the state-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), Metro TV (operated by KBC), the Kenya Television Network (KTN), the first TV station to break state broadcasting monopoly, Nation TV, Citizen TV, Stella TV (STV), and the Christian television station, Family TV.

While the growth of the media in Kenya is a welcome development, it has wrought commercial challenges that cannot be effectively supported by existing economic conditions. Like other countries with multifarious media outlets, intense competition for a market share in Kenya has relentlessly devalued journalistic values in pursuit of formulaic sensationalism and frivolous entertainment. The ensuing battle for audiences – readers, viewers, and listeners – accompanied by commercial pressures have forced journalists to oftentimes ignore or disregard journalistic principles of truth, accuracy, balance, objectivity, and impartiality (Hanlin: 1992; Kieran, 1998). The resultant hypercommercialisation of the media, the commodification of news have resulted in the *tabloidisation* of the media in Kenya modelled on Western, especially British, tabloid press which is often ‘sensational, sometimes sceptical, sometimes moralistically earnest ... [and] populist’ (Fiske, 1992: 48). The economic successes of tabloid journalism are indubitable, and this is often hugely attractive to modern media organisations interested in tapping into these coffers. This is illustrated by various products, the ostensibly popular but titillating *Pulse Magazine* in *The Standard*, and *The Star* newspaper (with most content being the lurid and melodramatic accounts of the lives of Kenyan celebrities) launched in July 2007 being good exemplars. *The Star* was apparently launched to offer competition to the upmarket press like *The Standard* and *The Nation* although its real competition now seems to be the *Pulse*’s based on a simple content analysis. Their obsession with trivia and sensationalist reporting has caused apprehension among discerning media watchers who believe such issues do not warrant the space accorded them when more pressing problems like poverty, crime, corruption, and others are commonplace and worthy of better coverage. Granted, commercial media are not overly interested, nor can they be compelled to report such issues without guaranteed economic returns on their investments. Moreover, in a liberalised economy, and democratic political

environment, they are at liberty to publish whatever they please.

This said, journalism in Kenya has gone through lean times, suffering credibility problems mainly because some journalists seemingly support specific political views, and take sides in political wrangles. For these reasons, people are now highly suspicious of journalists and the way they practice their trade, something which has put them in the same category as politicians whom Belsey says are ‘disrespectful, untrustworthy and dishonest, pushing a personal or sectional interest rather than the facts of the case’ (1998: 1). For these reasons, numerous problems have befallen the Kenyan press, particularly *The Standard* for taking what some consider a ‘partisan’ or ‘biased’ hard-line stance against the ‘new’ government of Mwai Kibaki, the opposition leader elected president in 2002 after almost 40 years of KANU rule and quarter century of Daniel arap Moi’s somewhat autocratic presidency. This view is supported by the fact that The Standard Group, publishers of the daily *The Standard* and *Sunday Standard* newspapers and owners of the Kenya Television Network (KTN) is linked to Moi who apparently acquired it from the Lonhro Group, the British multinational corporation, when they sold it to ‘undisclosed’ local investors in the late 1990s. This association is somewhat murky but is almost obvious given the fact that Joshua Kulei, Moi’s personal assistant of many years and frontman is a director in the company.²

The ensuing hostile relationship between the government and *The Standard* has not been beneficial particularly to the latter which, like other media houses, relies on government financial support. Given the fact that the government holds the biggest advertising purse, a frosty liaison between the Kenyan government and the media is always unwelcome. Early this year, for example, the government ordered the withdrawal of advertisement from *The Standard* following a sustained attack on the

² In an article in the *Daily Nation* prior to the 2002 election, Macharia Gaitho, a respected Kenyan journalist with many years experience, wrote: “As a long time personal assistant to President Moi, JC – as he is popularly known – has been a key figure in almost all the happenings around the President. He played key background roles, mostly as a fundraiser, for President Moi’s successful election campaigns in 1992 and 1997. Lately, he has been pre-occupied with the presidential succession strategies. Mr Kulei, 54, is one of the wealthiest men in Kenya but there has always been a debate over his real stake in the host of companies he has been associated with – with some seeing him as a proxy for President Moi.” See article, Gaitho, Macharia (2002) ‘What will become of Moi’s most trusted lieutenants’, *Daily Nation* [online] 29 January. Available from <<http://nationaudio.com/elections/moisuccession/Moi%20Sunset/story6.htm>> [14 April 2007].

performance of some public officials, particularly the Minister for Internal Security, John Michuki. The withdrawal of government adverts was seen as part of punishment meted out to the group for ‘dissent’. The move did not go down well with *The Standard* and other media organisations which saw it a sign of increasing intolerance exhibited by some powerful political elites. As expected, *The Standard* was furious, terming it an ‘attack on independent media’. Reporters Without Borders called it ‘absurd and dangerous’.³ In an editorial headlined ‘Stop this vendetta against us’, *The Standard*, wrote on its front page of 18 April 2007 that:

The great tragedy of our day is that the lowest form of propaganda and blackmail — lack of information, misinformation, disinformation, and a contempt for the truth and the reality of most citizens’ lives — has overridden the golden credo that Government exists to do no harm and for the good of all. This is obviously the case in Kenya today when a section of Government withdraws advertising from the Standard Group Limited on the spurious grounds that the media house is adversarial to it. The harm intended is financial incapacitation — a scheme that is doomed to fail. This is obviously the case when State resources are marshalled to intimidate a media house whose only crime is executing its legitimate mandate in the public interest when such resources could make a huge difference in the Mt Elgon region, currently experiencing fatal clashes between our citizenry. The question that must be asked is: Is there an attempt to peg advertising to favourable media coverage? What is this supposed to tell those citizens — taxpaying and otherwise — whose only source of information is *The Standard* and KTN? That they don’t matter or that for their Government to communicate with them, they must consume media of the Government’s choice?⁴

On his part, Michuki appeared to suggest that the move was warranted by what he saw as a personal war against him by the paper.⁵ This could have a tinge of truth, although not proven, given that he had ordered on 2 March 2006 a raid on *The Standard* during which the newspaper’s press was destroyed, thousands of copies ready for distribution burnt, staff beaten, and its television station KTN shut down.

³ See, Reporters Without Borders (2007) ‘Government orders state sector to withdraw advertising from Standard Group media’, Reporters Without Borders [online], 19 April. Available from <http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=21804> [8 May 2007].

⁴ See *The Standard* commentary, available online at <http://www.eastandard.net/archives/cl/hm_news/news.php?articleid=1143967479&date=18/04/2007> [8 May 2007].

⁵ See Michuki’s comments on the BBC story about the withdrawal of the adverts, BBC (2007) ‘Kenyan ads move ‘attack on press’’. BBC [online], 18 April. Available from, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/africa/6569367.stm>> [19 April 2007].

Similar tactics – financial starvations, dismantling of presses, harassment and detention of journalists – have been applied previously. At the height of agitation for democracy, and the resulting state clampdown on political opposition in the 1980s and early 1990s, the then Moi government cut financial support to ‘independent’ media houses. Then the government had resolved that only the ruling party KANU owned newspaper, *Kenya Times*, was worthy of government support. All government advertising was channelled to the newspaper. This decision while not going down well with the rest of the media in the country was considered part of the authorities’ futile efforts to stifle press freedom by forcing *The Standard* and *The Nation* to either diminish or abandon their attacks on the then style of governance. *The Nation* (a subsidiary of the global Aga Khan empire) and *The Standard* (then part of the Lonhro Group) managed to weather the storm only due to their foreign ownership although their profit bases were severely dented. Suffice to say, despite reduced state support, the stature of *The Standard* and *The Nation* soared while the circulation and reputation of *Kenya Times* took a severe battering. It has never been able to recover, and has numerous times been on the verge of collapse despite change of ownership and shift in editorial policy. This exemplar has undoubtedly informed *The Standard’s* editorial policy and management given its close proximity to Moi. Since the attacks on *The Standard* however, there has been a marked change of tact. Although claiming to be immensely independent, the paper has since the advertisement stoppage substantially toned down its once vociferous attacks on the government.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that the proliferation of the media and rising press freedom in Kenya is hugely challenging. Despite increasing autonomy, and editorial freedoms experienced in Kenya, there is increasing government intolerance of journalistic ‘dissent’. Essentially, the government does not shy away from applying informal and formal pressures on the media. Thus despite claims of independence, media organisations have been forced to capitulate to government demands due to

lack of stable financial foundations, and the need to survive and compete in an increasingly uncertain media, economic and political environment.

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