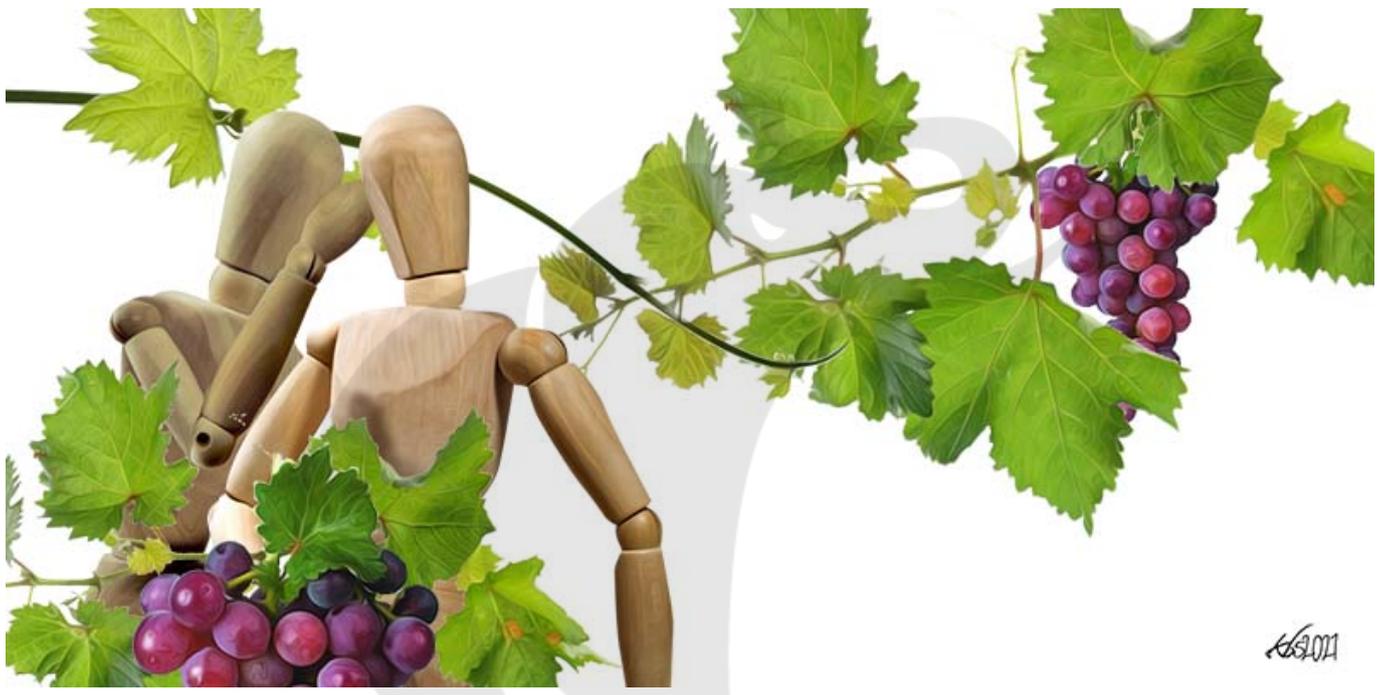




Tea, Receipts and the Tabloidization of Kenyan Culture and Society

By Silas Nyanchwani



To Kenyan millennials in urban spaces and on digital streets, Edgar Obare needs no introduction. The Instagram sensation is known for having converted his digital media account into a platform for salacious gossip, popularly known as “tea”. Screenshots of text messages and images are presented as evidence supporting his exposés to the 729,000 followers of Nairobi Gossip Club. The evidence presented is colloquially referred to as “receipts”. So popular has Edgar become that his presence on the Kenyan social media landscape has introduced the words “tea” and “receipts” into the Kenyan online lexicon.

Edgar’s latest exposé about the high-rolling life of Kilimani’s young “flamboyant businessmen” whose wealth is of dubious origin was a trending topic in late August and early September 2021. The “receipts” showed the nature of their businesses to involve treachery, the sale of fake gold, bank card fraud, money laundering, and defrauding unsuspecting members of the public.

Edgar claims that his exposé led to his main account being deactivated. Public pressure forced the Department of Criminal Investigations (DCI) to start investigations into the young men whose lavish lifestyles Edgar had exposed but few in the public have any faith that anything will come of the investigations.

Harsh criticism was reserved for Kenya's mainstream media. Brian Mbunde, a radio personality and leading member of Kenya's Twitterati, posted, "I am sorry for sharing this but it's dumb af for media houses to report about Edgar Obare losing his account and not the content he posted."

The evolution of digital tea and receipts

Edgar is not the first Kenyan to curate an online space publishing scandalous gossip and content that passes for investigative journalism in the Kenyan mainstream media. Robert Alai became a household name when he posted photos of individuals engaging in sex at the Muliro Gardens in Kakamega Town a decade ago. Alai's *Kahawa Tungu* blog became the go-to site for salacious content involving politicians and personalities in the entertainment industry. He became famous on Facebook and made himself an even bigger name on Twitter.

Then there was Bogonko Bosire's *Jackal News* which was known for combative and confrontational content that targeted people in high places. Before his disappearance in 2013, Bosire had positioned himself as the leading voice in the Kenyan blogosphere.

Blogs were quite popular in the early 2010s but as Twitter took root, *Media Madness* gained popularity with its exposés of the rot in the Kenyan media industry in the mid-2010s. Then came Cyprian Nyakundi who, depending on who you ask is the best investigative reporter, the boldest journalist, an extortionist, a rabble-rouser or a muckraker.

Now Edgar is the man of the moment on Instagram, the social media platform of the moment. It is a generational thing. The medium changes but the stories will always be told, one way or another. Some of his more memorable "teas" include an exposé of a governor's sexual escapades, the hedonistic ways of a certain "boys' club", and the infidelity of local musicians and online personalities.

The rise of online 'tabloids'

Asked why people love Obare, Lillian Mokeira, a digital influencer said, "I guess people and mostly women love him just for entertainment purposes. Who else serves tea like Edgar?"

Edgar has receipts and we trust him, and people feel confident sharing these stories with him.

Entertainment. Evidence. Trust.

In Kenya, media organisations ventured into tabloid journalism with the expansion of the economy under President Kibaki. As Boniface Mwangi recently explained in an episode of *Cleaning the Airwaves* on YouTube, *The Standard's Pulse* magazine, launched soon after Kibaki came to power, birthed the celebrity culture in the country.

Pulse was a cocktail of gossip, suggestive photos of women, and entertainment features. The Nation launched *Buzz* and *Daily Metro* (which folded within two years), before bringing out *Nation News* (which still has an online presence although the print version was discontinued). The Standard launched *The Nairobiian* in 2013. It peaked well but has since plateaued as the hunger for salacious gossip and scandalous stories is sated by the likes of Edgar Obare. A slew of blogs such as *Ghafla* and *Mpasho* also moved into the space, eating into the monopoly of the mainstream media. While tabloid newspapers have not picked up in Kenya, online tabloids have performed very well, producing some of the biggest scoops.

There is something dishonest about the Kenyan psyche. A part of us is steeped in Christianity and a certain Victorian puritanism that aspires to a cleaner, morally upright society. And then there is that

part of us that shows us for who we are: human, animal, corrupt, dirty-minded. And this is the part that enables the existence of Obare, those who came before him and those who will come after him.

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This is the part that explains Obare's 700,000+ Instagram followers. It is what has made Obare not just any other social media influencer but a one-man army with a mission: to profit from spreading gossip much in the manner of a tabloid. Speculation about how much he makes is rife, but in late 2020 and early this year, his platform was one of the most sought after by digital marketers.

Why do we love and loathe tabloids?

Those who love tabloids may love them because of the human's innate inclination to prurience, that dark and unhealthy obsession with sexual matters and other obsessions that feed the dark haunts of our psyche.

Edgar, therefore, is Kenyan society come full circle. From pretentiously prudish, where creators of salacious content are spurned by the blue chips, to a single blogger commanding a huge online following of potential consumers.

Edgar is a one-man tabloid enterprise. He has succeeded where tabloids have failed. He is only comparable to Uganda's *Red Pepper* (whose influence has predictably dwindled due to social media). In Uganda though, there is no hiding that people love their *Red Pepper*. In Kenya, we can be prissy.

Journalism 101: one of the things that makes anything newsworthy is prominence. We tend to focus on the lives of prominent people. In the past, it was monarchs, royalty, philosophers, artists. Today we have personalities who are famous for being famous, the socialites and those other social media personalities who cannot describe what they do in five words.

Human beings have always placed the talented, the gifted, or those bestowed with special attributes on a pedestal. We celebrate their rise to the top and with schadenfreude, enjoy their humiliation and their fall from grace.

We like and admire the famous, and increasingly, the not so famous, because they offer a window into our own souls, into our own dark urges. As comedian Lori Ann Rambough (stage name Sommore) observed when talking about braggadocio in rap music, "It is a fantasy one cannot live." The famous also allow us to participate vicariously in their lives, real or staged. We empathise when they are winning, and experience schadenfreude when they are losing.

Gossip as a function of power

Gossip is a function of power. Those without power use it as a tool of social protection, to galvanise into action or to cushion against an oppressor. Those who are powerless often turn to gossip as a way of trying to make meaning of their mundane lives. Since gossip often cannot be verified, it offers a veneer of protection to those who propagate it, while still passing on information.

There is a reason gossip is common with women, as Twitter user @disciplepati observed when she commented recently that historically, women have used gossip as a form of social protection and a means of spreading information about possibly predatory people, while men have demonized it because it is used as a safeguard against them.

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Gossip, if efficiently deployed, can also be used by the powerful to malign their competitors, and to manipulate people using misinformation and propaganda (the Cambridge Analytica approach is one example). Rumour and gossip have been used by the powerful to damage the reputations of others. In Kenya, gossip was used to end the careers of the once all-powerful Attorney General, Charles Njonjo, and Kenya's fifth Vice President, Josephat Karanja.

Two deaths and how the grapevine shaped their reportage

But gossip has not just been used politically to end careers. It has also been used to sow seeds of doubt about high profile assassinations. Thirty-three years ago, the remains of a 28-year-old British wildlife photographer were discovered in Maasai Mara. She had disappeared a few days earlier. In her brilliant book *A Death Foretold in Truth and Rumour: Kenya, Britain and the Julie Ward Murder*, Grace Musila underscores the role the grapevine played in the aftermath of the murder.

When mainstream/traditional media cannot facilitate information flow, the public fills in the void with speculation and conspiracy theories. And since the authorities are sometimes not trusted by individuals, gossip easily fills the information void.

An investigative story requires time and resources. It must also be cleared of the risk of libel. Whereas bloggers have a similar obligation to be truthful, few people who have been the subject of scandal are usually interested in suing, given that few bloggers can actually pay the hefty fines. If they have access to power, most of those exposed will intimidate the bloggers, gag them. A few have gone missing, or had their sites mysteriously taken down.

A year and four months after Ms Ward's remains were found, Kenya's Foreign Minister, Dr Robert Ouko was murdered in similar fashion. The two murders provide a good demonstration of how gossip works.

In both cases, the Moi regime was highly implicated in the cover up. Following Ouko's murder, the death of witnesses in unclear circumstances led to speculation and gossip about what had really occurred.

In every such murder, there is the official version that many people don't believe and the rumours that thrive. In the case of Ms. Ward, the son of a powerful government official was implicated but the political atmosphere of the time was such that no journalist, or anyone else, could freely mention the name of the suspect.

Both Ward and Ouko were reported to have committed suicide, an explanation that no one could believe. "In this environment of suspect and suspicious state truths, Kenyan publics following the case actively sought, created and circulated their own versions of the truth behind the tragedy through the grapevine, some of which made their way into local print media and back," writes Musila, adding, "For Kenyans, the various rumours regarding the murder provided material with which to map out the circumstances surrounding it, which in turn could be used as a fairly reliable index of the levels of brutality and violence of the Moi regime, among other things."

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Musila outlines the mutual paranoia of the state and citizens, made worse by the fact that state institutions and state-owned media took to self-censorship. In the 1980s and 1990s, many independent magazines operated by human rights activists and lawyers such as Gitobu Imanyara, Njehu Gatabaki and Pius Nyamora were also shut down because of repression and a toxic environment in which they simply could not thrive.

But social media cannot be easily controlled in similar fashion without the country becoming a pariah state. Although the arrests have not stopped - Obare, Nyakundi, Alai and other bloggers have spent nights in police cells because of what they post, others have lost their social media accounts, some have gone missing or lost their lives - Kenya is freer, the democratic space has widened.

Musila cites Kenyan scholar and author Keguro Macharia who has noted “the relationship between temporality - when something is published, edited, revised, deleted - and circulation, through reblogging, as a link, as a forward. . . .” Unlike a magazine, which could be closed down to contain the spread of damaging news, a controversial post at risk of being pulled down is screenshot and saved in the event that it disappears.

The future of Kenya’s grapevine

The media will continue to move online. Social media has democratized information and the mainstream media can no longer lay claim to a monopoly to information. Some media personalities have a larger following and a larger readership/viewership/listenership than traditional media.

Bloggers and social media personalities are now more trusted, especially where—like Obare and his “receipts”—they have built up their credibility. Where institutions are afraid of libel, intrepid social media personalities suffer no such limitations.

And so, even as the tools evolve and new social channels appear—Snapchat, TikTok—the online grapevine will continue to be a platform for citizen journalism, whistleblowing, mudslinging and cheap gossip.

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