



By Mwangi Githahu



Cape Town, South Africa - One could argue that it is never an easy time to be a journalist; but there is less debate about whether in these times when the media is in a constant state of change, it is getting harder to hold on to a permanent job in the press.

When it isn't the threat of digitisation taking jobs, it is what some people call rationalisation. Now in the study of psychology and logic, 'rationalisation' (also known as making excuses) is a defence mechanism in which controversial behaviour or feelings are justified and explained in a seemingly rational or logical manner to avoid the true explanation, and are made consciously tolerable — or even admirable.

In psychology and logic, 'rationalisation' (also known as making excuses) is a defence mechanism... In the corporate world, however, the same word means firing people

In the corporate world, however, the same word means, 'The organisation of a business according to scientific principles of management in order to increase efficiency,' in other words firing people.

According to a piece on the rawstory.com website, 'Hundreds if not thousands of reporters lost their jobs' in 2016. The article blamed the lack of a stable business model for the continued flailing of the newspaper and digital media industries.

According to the December 31, 2016 article, 'Hundreds if not thousands of reporters lost their jobs. Mashable, The Associated Press, The Guardian, The Huffington Post and Fusion all laid off journalists en masse — as did IBT, Newsweek's parent company.'

IN SA, PRIME TIME NEWS IS A SERIOUS REVENUE CHALLENGE

Here in South Africa, it was no different, with the leading independent (i.e. non state-owned) TV broadcaster, e.tv and its sister TV news channel eNCA, continuing to let staff go even after a dramatic culling in April 2015.

In April 2016 e.tv dropped a bombshell when it announced that it would be lobbying the broadcasting regulator for permission to remove all news from prime time, saying it is not a revenue generator

In April 2016 e.tv dropped a bombshell when it announced that it would be lobbying the broadcasting regulator for permission to remove all news from prime time, saying that TV news on e.tv during prime time is not a revenue generator. A senior executive with the station's holding company was quoted as saying at the time, 'If e.tv is forced to broadcast news during prime time, it will cause serious revenue challenges.'

In the middle of last year, there were rumours of a merger of two newspapers - the Cape Times and Cape Argus - from the Independent Media stable; with these rumours came fears of more staff retrenchments in the group, which has effected a large number of retrenchments since it changed ownership a few years ago.

At around the same time, the beleaguered state-broadcaster, SABC, fired eight journalists who spoke out about controversial editorial policies such as a blackout on protest coverage ordered by the SABC's then chief operating officer, Hlaudi Motsoeneng, but then was ordered to reinstate seven of them by the Labour Court.

Motsoeneng himself has since been found by the South African High Court to have been employed unlawfully to his high position at the state-broadcaster.

According to a News24.com article in August 2016, 'The struggling Gupta-owned news channel ANN7 on DSTv continues to fire journalists - first eight in June and then another five in July - for having participated in a public protest. The journalists were ordered to undergo disciplinary hearings for reasons like 'wasting water - a precious resource.'

KENYA, NO COUNTRY FOR OLD JOURNALISTS

Meanwhile, every few years in Kenya, at least for as long as I've been involved in the press (since 1989) media houses go through a cycle of job cuts followed by new hires and expansion. The year 2016 appears to have been one of those cycles.

Over the year, Royal Media Services, which owns Radio Citizen, Citizen TV and a string of vernacular stations, reportedly retrenched 26 media workers.

While these waves of cuts and growth are often led by accountants and shareholders focused on the bottom line, often the organisation's editorial management has the untidy job of choosing which members of staff to let go.

In 2015, the Standard Group, which owns the Standard newspapers and TV station KTN, was reported to have retrenched about 100 workers. According to one source, the blogger Cyprian

Nyakundi, 'The pruning of staff seems anchored in the regrouping of the "old Standard" employees and the departure of those poached, mainly from the Nation Media Group and Radio Africa's Star newspaper.'

The same year also saw retrenchments at the Nation Media Group, which owns the Nation newspapers and the NTV television station among other major media investments in East Africa. In 2016, NMG 'rationalised' its broadcasting division, scaling down its traditional radio business in Kenya, Nation FM and QFM, and Rwanda's KFM.

All the main media houses have 'culled' their editorial staff and many 'old-timers' who were also quite highly paid, were let go - often on the argument that the salary of one person could be spread over five less experienced and cheaper journalists.

While these waves of cuts and growth are often led by accountants and shareholders focused on the bottom line, often the organisation's editorial management has the untidy job of choosing which members of staff to let go.

Meanwhile, over at Radio Africa, which owns the Star newspaper, a string of radio stations and Kiss TV, there have also been rumours of impending staff layoffs driven by allegedly falling sales and growing competition from other media houses who have launched newspapers to rival the Star.

Industry newbies don't know enough to ask the difficult questions and a news organisation that is cutting back on costs, will not provide the newbie with the tools to carry out proper research

When media houses face these situations in Kenya, at least, there is often the feeling in the ranks that management use the job cuts as an excuse to get rid of senior staff members, high earners and the odd journalist that they've been unable to sack for whatever reason. It often appears, especially to those on the receiving end of the retrenchment notice, to be a twist on the thinking behind the phrase used by a now former British Labour Party spin doctor, who wrote a memo describing September 11 as a 'very good day' to bury bad news.

As a result there is often an unhealthy animosity that occurs between those who do get let go and those whose job it was to dismiss them - golden handshakes notwithstanding. In fact, when these dismissals occur, there is inevitably a rumour of a witch-hunt accompanying them. Human nature being what it is, the witch-hunt rumours are not always off track.

In my experience, the people who are sacked are more often than not the more highly paid, long standing staffers and their replacements are often young, smart, less costly but untested and untried.

These new journalists may be aggressive and ambitious but they lack the background that helps to do the job and the people to teach them.

While we were all once newbies in the news business, what helped most of us along the way were the old-timers who held what is known as the institutional memory. Not only did they know about a particular media house's history, they also knew other players in the industry and were often a wealth of news sources, contacts and tricks of the trade, which they generously shared with us newcomers.

While traditionally journalists were often said to be jacks of all trades, one of the problems with

being green in the news business was, and remains, the lack of experience.

Experience helps you see the bigger picture and teaches you to scratch beneath the surface of a news story. For instance, recently in the Standard newspaper there was a bizarre report about a Zabron Mathenge who threw a party to 'welcome home' to Meru County his newly imported Hummer H3 limousine -reportedly worth Ksh40 million (\$400,000).

As much as the report was a great example of conspicuous consumption by Kenya's newly rich (Mr Mathenge is a former police constable turned businessman, the report informed us), a more experienced reporter might have done some sort of backgrounder on this man and should have interviewed him to find out why he would stage such an elaborate party complete with rented boda boda riders who were paid in cash at a ceremony carried out in a school yard. If the reporter hadn't provided this sort of information, a sub-editor worth his salt should have asked for this detail to round out the story.

Industry newbies don't know enough to ask the difficult questions and a news organisation that is cutting back on costs, will not provide the newbie with the tools to do the labour-intensive work of carrying out proper research before writing up a story.

In the end, the news reading public is short-changed and if this loss of value continues, the smart reader will vote with his wallet and eventually be followed by advertisers. In these hard times, no media house can afford to be without advertising. In the words of Philip Ochieng, my first editor-in-chief: 'Every [media] owner and editor is keenly conscious that advertisements are the very lifeblood of his and other publications.'

CHEAP LABOUR AND THE SEXING UP OF STORIES

News organisations in Kenya and elsewhere, for that matter, are relying more and more on interns and other 'cheap labour' and, unable to cover traditional news stories and news features, are feeding consumers mainly basic information occasionally sexed up to read like an expose or investigative journalism even when a deeper reading shows that these stories fall short on several fronts.

So, for example, with the Meru Mr Moneybags story, questions about why he was splashing his cash about with a general election around the corner would have moved the story on from being just about conspicuous consumption to one about a possible wealthy rival for the local Governor, Senator or MP. Instead, if he now does run for office at the next election, few readers will make the connection and even fewer will be aware of how he amassed his fortune.

As a result, the reading and voting public will be unable to make a properly informed choice at the ballot box if he runs for office, as he most probably will. Let's face it, in Kenya, hardly anybody suddenly makes a big deal of their wealth, dishing out cash and seeking publicity, unless they are running for office.

Another problem is that partly for the reasons cited above, many Kenyan news outlets have what a Freedom House report on the country's media referred to as 'unstable revenue models.' The report also suggests that 'low pay leads some journalists — particularly those outside urban areas — to accept compensation from the entities that they cover,' a polite way of saying this encourages corrupt journalists or 'presstitutes' as they are known in India.

When journalists are compromised, or stop asking questions, they are leaving the reading public at the mercy of people who do nothing but bend and hide the truth

Corrupt journalists who take money from news sources to twist the news in a certain way or to look away from certain news stories are a sore topic in Kenyan newsrooms, as while there is often speculation about who is and who isn't compromised and how high up in the organisation it goes, nobody seems to look very hard for evidence and certainly it is hardly ever exposed except on the odd occasion that a Kamlesh Pattni type produces a list of journalists whom he 'assisted financially' or a land scam such as the Masongaleni Settlement Scheme of the early 1990s meant for squatters in Ukambani is exposed with a number of journalists popping up as beneficiaries.

When journalists are compromised, or stop asking questions, they are leaving the reading public at the mercy of people who do nothing but bend and hide the truth.

In the final analysis, there needs to be a better way to cut costs, make profits and still keep experience in the media while encouraging new blood. Media owners just need to get creative and find it.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).

