



By Mwangi Githahu



Cape Town, South Africa - PEACE AT ALL COSTS: BUT ONE DAY, YOU WILL HAVE TO PAY

During an election year such as this one in Kenya, much is made by politicians, the news media and to a lesser extent, the voting public, of media objectivity and neutrality.

The examples of how certain media houses and journalists showed partisanship and worse in the run-up to the 2007 election, and how much of the Rwandan media behaved leading up to the 1994 genocide, are dragged out and displayed as a caution to any Kenyan journalists and media houses that may be tempted to stray from the straight and narrow.

The British journalist Michela Wrong has spoken in the past of how the Kenyan media adopted a new 'peace at all costs' approach after the notorious 2007 election. In an attempt to reduce the likelihood of conflict, they started to avoid live broadcasts (or more general coverage) of potentially inflammatory content.

This strategy seemed to work at the 2013 election, which was peaceful, but as Wrong notes, the media's self-censorship had other, more problematic effects - for example, helping to fuel the government's 'draconian' new media law. If you suppress, muffle or bypass legitimate debates during elections,' she said, 'you could be storing up trouble for the future.'

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at the altar of bias

The August 2017 election in Kenya is that future and from where I sit, it would appear to me that 'legitimate debate' has been stifled in the media by the reporting of trivialities as well as not particularly skilful manipulation by the different political groupings and of course the tribalism issue.

Media practitioner Oscar Obonyo queried this trivialising of issues in favour of a tribal agenda in a recent social media posting where he queried how voter registration numbers were being reported. Obonyo observed, 'The media and politicians are now falling over themselves concluding who between [the ruling] Jubilee [party] and [the nascent] National Super Alliance, NASA, will win the August polls.'

Obonyo, a former writer and analyst on the *Sunday Nation*, asked, 'Why are you boxing us in regional blocs and conditioning us to vote along tribal lines? Do we as Kenyans have no crucial campaign issues? This is cheapening a very important exercise about our lives to a mere tribal competition of numbers!'

This last point of Obonyo's recalls the much debated Tyranny-of-Numbers hypothesis that was generated a few years ago by occasional media contributor Mutahi Ngunyi, leading to the conclusion that Raila Odinga and his CORD Alliance lost the 2013 election to Uhuru Kenyatta's Jubilee Alliance the moment the voter registration ended on December 18, 2012.

The facts on the ground are that pretty much ever since the dawn of Kenyan Independence, the country's voting has been largely directed by tribal leaders, some might say warlords. The only exception to this rule came during the period between 1969 and 1991 when the country went from being a de facto to a de jure one-party state where tribal blocs were neither particularly obvious nor relevant in the way Kenyans voted.

Indeed, at all elections I've covered in Kenya as a reporter since the return to multiparty election of 1992, one of the most unfortunate aspects affecting the mainstream media has been this manipulation into a tribal agenda by leading politicians. It has caused many journalists (and at times, entire media houses), to blur the distinction raised by Obonyo and others.

A PASSIVE PUBLIC: WHAT MORE COULD POLITICIANS WANT

As was recently demonstrated at the US elections and before that during the Brexit vote in the UK, fact checking and real issues such as the economy, poverty, health, education and defence, are abandoned at the altar of bias.

When the media wittingly or unwittingly leads news consumers to see everything through the distorting prism of tribal strengths and weaknesses, the voters themselves end up becoming passive objects of the 'news agenda' being pursued in tandem with the wishes of the political tribal chiefs.

What ends up happening is that the public is rendered passive via bombardment by a constant news cycle highlighting the tribal minutiae of the election as per the media's agenda.

Pesach Benson of the honestreporting.com site and author of *Red Lines: The Eight Categories of Media Bias*, highlighted what he called the Eight Violations of Media Objectivity:

Benson lists these as:

1. Misleading definitions: Prejudicing readers through language.
2. Imbalanced reporting: Distorting news through disproportionate coverage.
3. Opinions disguised as news: Inappropriately injecting opinion or interpretation into coverage.
4. Lack of context: Withholding a frame of reference for readers.
5. Selective omission: Reporting certain events over others, or withholding key details.
6. Using true facts to draw false conclusions: Infecting news with flawed logic.
7. Distortion of facts: Getting the facts wrong.
8. Lack of transparency: Failing to be open and accountable to consumers of news.

I can say without fear of contradiction that one time or another in the run-up to the August election (which, in these days when Kenya would appear to be on a permanent election campaign footing, is the period since the end of the 2013 election) the Kenyan media has been guilty of each of these sins.

A common error by journalists and others is to assume that objectivity helps ferret out the truth. In actual fact, objectivity in journalism has nothing to do with seeking out the truth, except in so much as truth is a matter of accurately reporting what others have said.

Some of us who have been engaged in news gathering over the years have learned that reporting involves judgements about what is a good story, who will be interviewed for it, what questions will be asked, which parts of those interviews will be printed or broadcast, what facts are relevant and how the story is written.

In theory, journalists would like to claim that their own biases and the pressures from advertisers and media owners do not affect their work because of their professional norm of 'objectivity' but the reality on the ground often tells a different story.

HE SAID, SHE SAID... EXACTLY NOTHING

We like to think that when writing a story or broadcasting, we do not overtly express our own views, evaluations, or beliefs. But do this successfully tends to replace journalistic investigation altogether and instead limits a story to the 'he said, she said' discussion of clashing opinions, rather than facts gathered by the reporters themselves.

And while some think that such reporting is 'balanced,' there are others, including myself, who believe it is disingenuous in that it perpetuates the impression that reporters are simply conveying the 'facts' and not trying to influence how people interpret them.

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When it comes to a situation such as the coverage of elections, at least, there are those who believe that 'just the facts' without any evaluation of the story or the reporter's personal view of a story in a publication that is known to lean one way or the other, is unhelpful and somewhat dishonest.

As far as I'm concerned, the ideal of complete journalistic objectivity is in practice an unrealisable dream. And the sooner journalists and media houses come to accept this, the better.

It would appear I am not alone.

A paper entitled *The Myth of Objectivity in Journalism: A Commentary*, by Richard F. Taflinger published by the Washington State University, argues, 'Preconceptions, prejudices, biases, cultural norms and mores, education, superstition, peer opinion, all play their role in an people creating their own realities.'

Taflinger writes: 'These filters are preconceptions, biases, prejudices and attitudes that influence the way the mind processes information and therefore how the individual constructs his or her world and reality.'

'For example, several witnesses see a traffic accident no one could survive. Nonetheless, nobody is hurt. All the witnesses see, objectively, the same event. Yet, what they "see" differs according to how they filter the information: A devoutly religious person will see the hand of God in sparing the victims; a politician may see a necessity for government action to make that intersection safer; an attorney may see a potential lawsuit; a sexist may blame a driver of the opposite sex. It is a problem well known to law enforcement and the legal profession: Eyewitnesses can't seem to agree on what they saw. It is not the fault of the witness. It is simply that what is perceived must be understood, and understanding usually comes through relating new information to old. Whatever the old information is influences how the new is understood.'

In fact, what is needed is for the consumer of news to be more discerning and to be aware that the reporter's worldview or that of a particular media house, are always going to be a component of the news.

This is not a new phenomenon and as I don't see it dying out any time soon, perhaps then for the sake of transparency the media should drop all pretence at neutrality or objectivity and let the consumer decide if they want to support a particular newspaper, website or broadcaster.

It happens in other democracies such as in Europe, where certain newspapers are known to be right or left leaning as the case may be. In Britain, all newspaper readers know for instance that the *Telegraph*, the *Times* and the *Daily Mail* will favour the conservatives, while the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* will bat for the Labour Party.

In the US, it's the same with newspapers of record such as the *New York Times*, known to support the Democrats, and others such as the *Wall Street Journal* that tend to be more conservative in their views and readership.

IDEOLOGY IN KENYA: SO, WHAT TRIBE ARE YOU?

Of course, the problem in Kenya is that there is no longer any strong ideology guiding political parties and alliances, which again reduces public discourse to the division of tribes.

At Independence, Kanu was perceived as an alliance of the two 'big tribes' - the Kikuyu and the Luo - while the so-called smaller tribes tended to coalesce in Kadu.

At the beginning of the second multiparty dispensation in Kenya, at first with the original Ford party, it appeared as though the tribal pairing off had ended, but soon with the splitting of the party into two and later three Fords, it became apparent that Ford-Kenya attracted mainly Luo support while Ford-Asili was supported mainly by Kikuyus (who split their vote with the Democratic Party which cast itself as a party of the wealthy as opposed to a particular tribe) and Kanu was mainly a Kalenjin, Luhya and Kamba outfit.

Since then, the tribal alliances may shift somewhat at the elections, but the parties remain vehicles to propel one or the other tribe to State House. Even the much touted 2002 election that saw Kanu

thrown out of power for the first time since Independence, saw tribal chiefs come together as Narc, leaving mainly the Kalenjin in Kanu.

Back in 1992, there were three main daily newspapers: *Daily Nation*, the *Standard* and the *Kenya Times*; two mainstream political news weeklies, *Weekly Review* and the *People* newspaper; and two broadcasters, the state-owned KBC with its TV and radio stations and the then Kanu-owned (but not that you'd know it) KTN TV station that tried to act as a commercial entity to counter the state broadcaster, which pretty much gave the opposition a blackout.

The *Kenya Times* (where, in the interests of disclosure, I worked at the time) was owned by the ruling party Kanu and made no bones about it. The paper supported Kanu and though there was never anything on paper to suggest that this was policy, editorially it did all it could to reflect Benson's eight violations of media objectivity.

Daily Nation tried to position itself as the newspaper of record and full objectivity, but it was clear to anyone who took an interest in such matters, that the newspaper was pro the DP. It made a point of running DP adverts in a prominent position on its front pages, claiming when questioned that the party had booked the space and elbowed out all the other parties who had to fight for less prominent positions on the inside pages.

Many Kenyans have embraced a poorly regulated social media scene and more and more news websites, a number of them purveying fake news or propoganda, have been taking advantage of this to push their agenda

Though the *Standard* was at that time owned by the LonRho conglomerate and as such nominally independent, the head of LonRho in Kenya was Mark Too, a known factotum of Kanu's President Moi, and so while the paper tended to cover the opposition Ford parties, it was clear that in the end it danced to the Kanu tune.

By the 2007 election, the Kenyan media landscape had changed quite a bit from how it appeared in 1992, and so, to some extent at least, had the political landscape.

Kanu, which had been routed at the 2002 election, was now a mere shadow of its former monolithic self and the *Kenya Times* newspaper had thus fallen on hard times; it would eventually fold in 2010.

Daily Nation, which had for most of the Moi-Kanu regime been broadly opposition-leaning, was under the Kibaki-Narc administration perceived by many to be a pro-establishment newspaper leaving the once pro-Kanu *Standard* to assume the opposition newspaper mantle while in 2007 the brand new *Star* newspaper also seemed to favour the opposition.

The once influential state-broadcaster no longer enjoyed dominance of the airwaves as there were now at least 90 private FM stations and more than 15 private TV stations giving it competition and the public, ostensibly more choice - even though many of the private radio and TV stations are owned by a handful of media houses that in turn are owned by leading politicians and their supporters.

AND LASTLY, THE INTERNET: STFU, HATERS

Another difference today is related to comparatively high Internet use in Kenya boosted by better connectivity enabled by submarine cables and the widespread use of mobiles, which has enabled more Kenyans than ever to access the web. In fact, according to Internetworldstats.com, there were

21 million Internet users by December 2013 in a population of 44 million people.

As a result, many Kenyans have embraced a poorly regulated social media scene and more and more news websites, a number of them purveying fake news or propaganda, have been taking advantage of this to push their agenda.

While on paper the country's Constitution contains potential curbs on press freedom with regard to privacy, incitement and hate speech, from purely anecdotal evidence there would appear to have been very little monitoring of hate speech and political propaganda on the fast growing social media scene or for that matter vernacular radio.

To counter this perception, the Communications Authority of Kenya recently announced plans to monitor social media activity and has reportedly secured monitoring equipment to help it achieve this aim. The regulator has also warned that it could pull the plug on social media if national security comes under threat.

But it remains to be seen whether such measures will be enough to prevent problems the closer the country gets to the election.

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