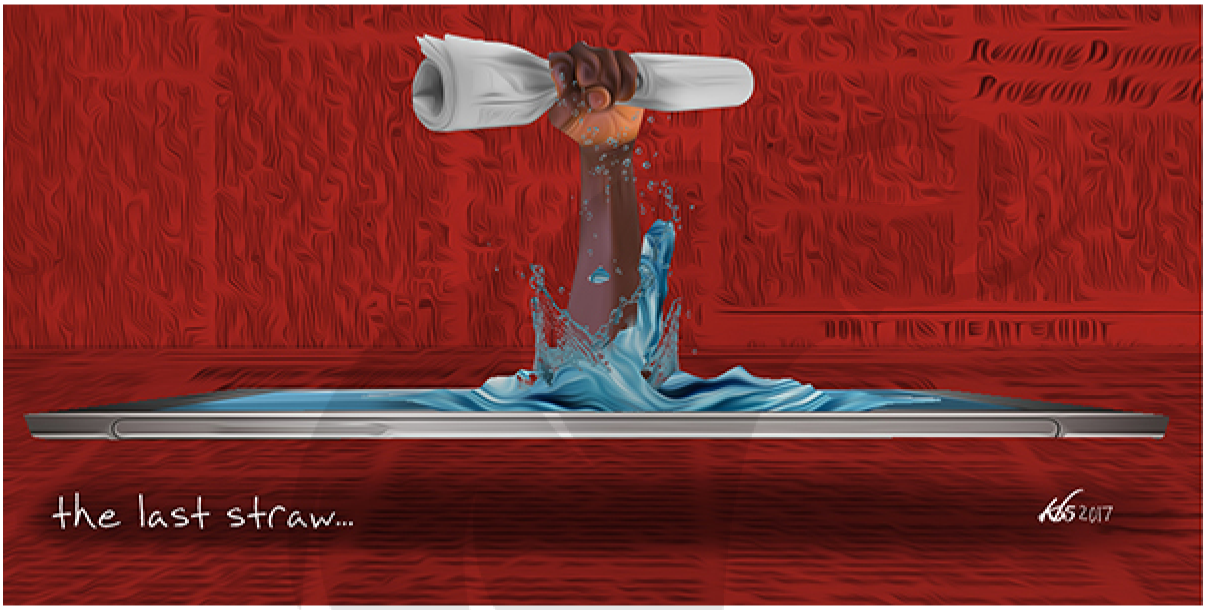
I Accuse the Press: Why the Kenyan Media Must ‘Get With the Programme’

By Abdullahi Boru Halakhe



Charles Onyango-Obbo is an astute media practitioner with loads of experience. For many years, he has been writing three weekly columns, one in Kenya’s *Daily Nation,* another one in Uganda’s *Daily Monitor*, and one in the regional newspaper *The East African.*

Onyango-Obbo has also held various editorial management positions at both the Nation and the Monitor. So when he writes, especially on issues to do with the media, he writes from a position of authority. His piece, on the move by the Kenyan government to move all their advertising to a single portal managed by Government Advertising Agency (GAA) – in effect denying the media revenue from government advertisements – is hugely instructive. Onyango-Obbo believes that the media should stop wringing their hands and crying red murder, and instead use this as an opportunity for growth and innovation.

However, Mutuma Mathiu, a top editor at the Nation Media Group, took a moral stance against the move by the Kenyan government, equating it to publishing in the Soviet era publication *Pravda.*

One thing both pieces missed was how the media found itself in the present predicament in the first place.

Binge growth and failure of imagination

Until recently, the four biggest media houses in Kenya – the Nation Media Group (NMG), the

Standard Group Limited, Royal Media Services, and the Radio Africa Group – witnessed exponential growth, which blinded them to the shifting media reality of technological growth and demography.

Further, the media also failed in its role in holding the authorities to account. As a result, the media has been stuck in a time warp, which has inevitably led to a sense of misplaced entitlement, and also their alienation from the citizens.

In the early 1990s, the *Standard* newspaper, the oldest newspaper in the country, saw the future in broadcast, and so acquired the Kenya Television Network (KTN), the first non-pay, privately owned TV-station in Africa. The newspaper's close alliance with the state, especially during the Daniel arap Moi era, ensured steady government advertising revenue. (President Moi owned shares in the Standard Group.)

> KTN, which was initially a bold step forward, got locked into an imaginary internecine cat-and-mouse fight with the Nation Media Group's NTV station over who had the best programing, which resulted in the poaching of individual journalists and producers – a carryover of print turf wars into broadcast. This allowed Royal Media's Citizen TV to beat them both. KTN has since been playing catch-up with Citizen TV.

As a result, and also considering they had good programming, KTN became a runaway success. However, this masked the lack of creativity at the *Standard* newspaper. Therefore, the *Standard* continuously lagged behind the *Nation*, the region's largest media enterprise, in revenue and growth.

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Application of the wrong models

While the *Nation* newspaper overtook the *Standard* in terms of market leadership and growth, the Nation's broadcasting division struggled from the outset. Its original sin was convergence, and the application of the print model to broadcast.

Nation assumed their print model could be transferred to the broadcast medium; so confident were they in their model that they initially gave air slots to their senior print journalists.

Just as the Standard hid under KTN's success to cover up their deficiency in print, the Nation also hid under print's success, and ignored the broadcast division's inadequacies, including its staid programming.

Last year, the Nation Media Group's management finally pulled the plug, and opted for an all-digital broadcast unit. Too little, too late.

If they were guilty of applying the newspaper model to broadcast, Patrick Quarcoo, Radio Africa's proprietor, was similarly guilty of applying the radio model to the *Star* newspaper, which has largely been a failure. The *Star* has been bleeding dry radio revenue.

Had Quarcoo stayed in radio, where both Kiss TV and Classic FM have been incredibly successful, he would have been crowned the “King of Radio”. With all the new county/community radio stations coming up, he would also be controlling a substantive radio advertising market.

If the Nation Media Group and Radio Africa applied the wrong model for the right medium, S.K. Macharia, the owner of Royal Media, after the initial mistake of trying his hand in print, decided to stick with what he knows best – broadcast. The result has been phenomenal growth of both his radio and TV stable.

Demography and technology are destiny

The median age in Kenya is 19 years and 80% of the country’s population is below the age of 35. Mobile phone penetration in Kenya was 88% in 2016. Facebook has approximately 5 million (and growing) active users in Kenya, while Twitter had slightly over 1.5 million. These few statistics are incredibly sobering for the media of the future.

As a means of engaging younger audiences, all the big four media houses have news apps. However, none are regularly updated, have good user experience, or have locally customised stories. Instead, they tend to carry old and international stories rather than national/local ones. Most of the people in the age-bracket to whom the apps would have appealed already get their international stories online, especially on social media platforms, since most of them are *glocal* and worldly.

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The failure to creatively engage younger audiences has left the media with a huge revenue loss, for which media managers have no answer. This has revealed the media’s incapacity to serve the changing tastes and media usage of the younger generation.

Younger audiences are not the only segment neglected by the media; women have also been ignored. On any day, most of the panelists on radio and TV are likely to be men. The only time women are included is when the panel discusses the role of women. A survey of newspaper columns in the main newspapers also reveals that the number of female columnists is disproportionately lower than that of men. This tokenism, despite the presence of qualified women in various fields, has seen many make a conscious effort to ignore the media.

The struggle against technological disruption is not limited to the Kenyan media. The *New York Times*, in its first report on how to be innovative in the face of breathless disruption of traditional media, which was released in 2014, stated: “Our core mission remains producing the world’s best journalism. But with the endless upheaval in technology, reader habits and the entire business model, *The Times* needs to pursue smart new strategies for growing our audience”.

In a subsequent report, the *Times* observed: “In the third quarter of 2016, our digital subscriptions grew at the fastest pace since the launch of the pay model in 2011 — and growth then exceeded that pace during the fourth quarter, in a post-election surge. We now have more than 1.5 million digital-only subscriptions, up from one million a year ago and from zero only six years ago. We also have more than one million print subscriptions, and our readers are receiving a product better than it has ever been, with rich new standalone sections.”

One would be hard-pressed to read any account of Kenya’s media in being forthright about their reflection on the state of the media.

Multimedia deep-dive storytelling

One way of addressing the deep apathy among the youth towards the media is through multi-media storytelling. The UK's *Guardian* newspaper and the *Economist*, both well respected publications, offer a best practice in new ways of telling stories. The *Guardian* is a centre-left publication while the *Economist* espouses economic liberalism that includes free trade, globalisation, and freedom of movement. Yet both publications, despite suffering the natural readership decline of hardcopy, have a solid online and subscription base. They have blazed the trail of innovation, especially on digital platforms. The *Guardian* provides a raft of products: the Long Read that is also produced as a podcast; and multi-media productions, including short documentaries and videos. All these products are available on the website, but also on the app.

Similarly, the *Economist* has an army of digital, graphic and data visualizations, especially for their long reads. It also has a slew of podcasts on technology, business, finance, etc. Unlike the *Guardian*, the *Economist* has limited the number of articles that one can access for free per week; if one wants more, one needs to subscribe.

> Nothing illustrates the death of serious journalism than Jeff Koinange. His show on KTN, Jeff Koinange Live, was a circus. His clowning on national TV with a fire extinguisher was a sad example of how low a once renowned journalist – who had even been a correspondent for CNN and who many looked up to as a role model – could sink. The line between serious TV journalism and fantasy became hard to discern.

In Kenya, so far, only the *Daily Nation* engages in data journalism through its Newsplex. This long form immersive journalism rather than the he-said-she-said variety is the future of journalism. This form moves away from the traditional "5Ws and H" to the "so what?" that is central to fulfilling audience's needs.

Dereliction of duty

The Kenyan media played a sometimes not fully acknowledged critical role in the expansion of democratic space in Kenya in the late 1980s and early 1990s during Moi's repressive era. The media, against multiple odds, continuously exposed human rights violations and the massive corruption of the Moi administration. By setting the agenda for an open, pluralistic and transparent administration, as opposed to the centralised version Moi advocated for, the media reflected the aspirations of many Kenyans.

For this, the Kenyan media paid a steep price. Nothing exemplifies this more than the *People Daily*, against whom the recently deceased once powerful minister, Nicholas Biwott, won multi-million-shilling libel cases. The *People Daily* never recovered financially from those dubiously awarded costs.

After Moi's Kanu party was defeated in the 2002 elections, the media was keen to quickly cash in on the role they had played in expanding the democratic space. But because they were not keen to kill the goose that lays the golden egg – the advertiser, which included the government – they lost sight of their principal role. The broadcast media, especially, moved away from hiring serious journalists and instead put on air men and women, some with fake accents, who behaved more like actors or comedians, rather than journalists, to increase ratings.

Nothing illustrates the death of serious journalism than Jeff Koinange. His show on KTN, Jeff Koinange Live, was a circus. His clowning on national TV with a fire extinguisher was a sad example of how low a once renowned journalist – who had even been a correspondent for CNN and who many looked up to as a role model – could sink. The line between serious TV journalism and fantasy became hard to discern. When Jeff was off the air, the air waves were filled with third-rate Mexican soap operas.

Morning radio shows are a mixture of soft porn, where even the former Harambee Star Coach, Jacob "Ghost" Mulei, has a morning show with others where he has turned into a marriage counsellor of sorts. Mid-morning radio shows are pretty much driven by the Top 100 music formatting.

> In Kenya today it is not uncommon to hear someone, even a trained journalist, remark nonchalantly, "You know, I don't read the newspapers." For some, it is even considered a badge of honour to say, "I don't watch TV." While these sentiments are anecdotal, they speak volumes about a larger problem.

This inevitably has led to many having little regard for the media. In Kenya today it is not uncommon to hear someone, even a trained journalist, remark nonchalantly, "You know, I don't read the newspapers." For some, it is even considered a badge of honour to say, "I don't watch TV". While these sentiments are anecdotal, they speak volumes about a larger problem. There was a time when watching the 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. news was a must in many households. Even if your family did not have a TV set, you would head to the neighbour's house to catch the news. Buying a newspaper was seen as a status symbol and a sign that one follows current affairs. That golden age of the media is gone.

Newspapers are for wrapping meat

In December 2013, President Uhuru Kenyatta said newspapers were only good for wrapping meat because they publish false news. Some journalists took umbrage at this statement, but few, if any, cared. It was a kind of poetic justice and a commentary on the state of journalism and media in Kenya. The media's standing has plummeted thus far to the point that a president can nonchalantly dismiss the media without attendant costs. For the media, the lack of distinct response from the public regarding the president's statement should be instructive. Once the mainstream media relinquished its critical agenda-setting credentials, they stopped speaking for *Wanjiku*.

On 17 July this year, Kenyans expected to watch televised presidential running mate debates. But the politicians from the major political parties did not show up, except Eliud Muthiora Kariara, a former banker-turned-running mate and independent presidential candidate Japhet Kavinga Kaluyu. If the media had any doubt about their status with politicians, this episode served up another reminder that, in an election year, politicians can ignore the media, and expect to bear no costs politically.

Instead of seeing the failure to show up as politicians' abdication of their duty, all the media could see was the money they lost in preparation for the debates. It was bizarre watching visibly irritated media talking heads expressing anger at losing the money they would have made, since that was not the primary reason for the debates in the first place.

This gap has been filled by individual bloggers, like Owaahh, whose treatment of the Imperial Bank explosion was incredible, way better than any business pages, and the disparate collection of individual citizen "journalists" called Kenyans on Twitter (#KOT). This irreverent group of individuals have sometimes broken stories and pushed agendas mainstream media are either afraid of or not interested in pursuing. One such story is the maize scandal, which the mainstream media was slow to warm up to. #KOT "sleuths" asked the hard questions regarding the origin of the maize after searching the ship's online manifest, something the mainstream could have done.

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While individual bloggers and conscious citizens on social media platforms have done an admirable job, they cannot be a substitute for a functioning mainstream media. With the explosion of Fake News, which is mostly generated and transmitted through social media, a robust and credible mainstream media has never been more needed. During the political party's primaries, photoshopped newspapers claiming that Dr. Paul Otuoma had left the ODM party to join Jubilee started circulating in Busia town. These stories were wildly shared on social media platforms. People had to turn to mainstream media to find out if they were true.

With the elections just days away, the media have a real opportunity to distinguish themselves. If they don't use this opportunity, their relevance will decline further, if not completely.

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