

*“Re-defining the role of the media in conflict and
in general media practice”*



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Introduction:

“We were anxious. We knew it was the day when the election results were going to be read. We knew that things in Nairobi had not been very good since the counting of the votes begun. In our town, the tension was high. Rumour went round that if the incumbent presidential candidate did not win, things will be bad in Molo but rumour also had it that if he won, we will still be in trouble because the then opposition party ODM was not going to allow it. That night, we listened pensively to the radio (A vernacular radio station). The announcer was talking to some people in the studio who said in our tribe that if He (Kibaki) won the elections then we will have to be prepared for war. We knew then that there was going to be war because we heard it on the radio”*
(Commission witness to the Commission of Inquiry into Post-elections violence; July 2008)

This was a strong affirmation. The people believed what they heard from the radio – from the media. It is still the believable adage in our part of the world. Down deep in the rural settings, the debates and arguments at shopping centres and market places always borders on what people have heard on Radio, seen on TV or read in the newspapers. This is the “truth” that people hang on to before, during and after the elections of 2007 in Kenya – The same “truth” from a media that seemingly let them down so badly. It gives a sense of *de ja vu* of the unfortunate happenings during the Rwanda Genocide 15 years ago when Radio Television *Libres des milles Collines* (RTL) was largely accused of fuelling the genocide through inflammatory reporting targeted at a specific community.

These days, every single forum in my country and beyond focusing on democracy, governance and issues of justice and transitional justice, the media is bashed and demonised for its contribution to the post-election violence that left over 1,500 people dead, tens of thousands injured and maimed and more others displaced – their lives forever destroyed.

The dynamics of the conflict are diverse but they all border on the challenges of a young democracy teetering on the threshold of bad governance/politics of greed and manipulation and severe negative ethnicity, propagated by the political class and efficiently disseminated by an equally polarised media that did little to calm the fires of politics gone terribly wrong.

The truth that hurts:

In the voices and eyes of many Kenyan journalists with a passion for this profession, from the chaos that erupted in Kenya, there is something in there which I hope this forum will address.

What is there is probably what every Journalist who has ever covered conflict has asked himself/herself at the end of the day when they go to bed; Did I make a difference?.

For purposes of my presentation, I begin by asking the fundamental question that every born journalist asks themselves; “Can I save the world?”

It is a laughable take, almost ridiculous and sometimes even dismissed as irrationally idealistic to even be considered but I beg to represent the experiences of some Kenyan journalist caught in the web of conflict, the ones who sat back and reflected on their purpose in the profession and even some like me who re-discovered themselves and quietly opted out of the mainstream to seek that specific truth about this profession that is indeed so elusive – those

who are out there seeking to re-define the role of the media in the changing democratic societies within which we operate. But first let us look into the state of media technologies.

Not yet celebrating:

This forum celebrates the revolution of the new/digital media – the advent of cyberspace opening unlimited possibilities for information dissemination, networking and linking the world within the shortest span of time.

It is all well, except that after the post-election violence in Kenya, the new/digital media has given us very little to celebrate.

The advent of the new media paved way to some really erratic kind of Journalism that sneaked into our midst when the rest of us in the mainstream media were hardly aware.

In a report titled **“Soft Power in Kenyan Politics” – Popular Culture , New Technologies and the 2007 Elections;** scholars Mbugua wa Mungai & Hezron Ndunde Otieno lament the advent of the new digital media thus; *“..cyber space is difficult to police (this with a special focus on sms and the internet) ; freedom of expression especially copping after the authoritarian years during which civil liberties such as free speech had been heavily curtailed is highly prized. Rumour as narrative is anonymous, a fact which guarantees its popularity (it frees people of the responsibility of authorship on the account of the friend-to friend told me phenomena and consequently, its potency as a medium of social critique. On the other hand, sms’s are preferred because they are brief and highly portable.*

The far-reaching impact:

While the mainstream media was busy doing the conventional which is analysing and reporting the elections on TV/Radio/print, the New media had ideas of its own.

The Kenyan media had had its lessons on the role of the media in democratization process, it had most probably rehearsed its watch-dog role and built extensively on its analytical and commentary base from which to set the agenda for the elections.

Over the years, the Kenya Media has grown in stature and acquired immense credibility in coverage and most importantly elbowed its space as a crucial aspect in the democratization process.

Steadman, a respected research house known for incisive opinion polling made this clear in its 2007 report; *“Media have consistently enjoyed a great deal of public trust, as evidenced by opinion poll findings which stated that the majority of Kenyans relied on radio , television and newspapers for information to make political decisions”*. This was evident from the way the trends manifested itself during the election period of 2007 – 2008.

The cyberspace messed-up our media space:

At the end of it all, when the blood was flowing freely in the streets and we counted the dead one by one, then we in the mainstream paused to look back at the damage that had supposedly been done through the cyber space.

The many “funny” sms’s that were circulating were suddenly not funny anymore. It begun to emerge that indeed quite a bit of the violence that erupted was orchestrated and organised through sms and selective internet blogs managed and targeted at particular communities.

Infarct, in the report ; “*Soft Power in Kenyan Politics*”, Mungai and Otieno clearly indicate that indeed the Far –reaching impacts of using the sms medium of communication, infarct implying that the outbreak of violence in several parts of the Rift Valley province on December 30th happened spontaneously because it was co-ordinated via sms.

Then enter the blogosphere where cyberspace politics took hatred dimensions and degenerated forums where perpetrators maximised on cyberspace derogatory and deranging inferences against “enemy” tribes sometimes going as far as lapsing into ethnic dialect to drive the point home.

Bloggers worked around the clock with extremely creative emails, filling up time and space with what was later acknowledged by the CIPEV Commission as having contributed immensely to raising the tensions and passions of the masses.

Maintaining sanity amidst insanity:

The mainstream media in Kenya cannot be exonerated from blame as a contributing factor to what happened after the disputed elections. Unlike the new/digital media where the accused in many instances than once is a faceless sms sender or a blogger forwarding mails to thousands of recipient without care for credibility, the mainstream was on the spot and rightfully so. It was the medium that had the full attention of the masses; the one that dared its credibility and affirmed its professional barking with the basis of upholding media ethics. However, the mainstream was caught-up in a web of malpractice;

- Lack of objectivity
- Bias reporting and coverage inclined towards a particular candidate
- Polarised opinions & commentaries encouraged by media policies in newsrooms.

- Partisan representation of media events.
- Distorted media messages that did nothing to calm the tension of an already anxious population.
- Lack of sense & sensibility when reporting politicians embroiled in political propaganda and tribal side shows.

The elusive Objectivity:

In a recent commentary bordering on this same topic under discussion, Kenyan Journalism academic Jerry Okungu scoffs at the mere mention of media objectivity in an Op-ed piece published by the East African Standard of May 19th 2009; “ *Who says media anywhere can be objective? Where did that lie come from? Take it from me; No media on earth can be objective, be it the Daily Nation, New York Times, New Vision or the Financial times of London. The reason that they cannot be objective is because the word objective itself is a misnomer, In the real world, we (the media) are as biased about everybody and everything everyday of our lives. All we can do is minimize the bias to acceptable levels*”.

An obviously disillusioned Jerry seeks to confront the monster that incidentally looks good in volumes of media discourse but is hardly ever feasible in media practice.

Objectivity was the devil dancing on the backs of the media in Kenya during the crisis – objectivity, or lack of it is actually the pigeon hole through which the weakness within the media were exposed as layer after layer of accusations were levelled against us.

But why should that surprise us? We all do know and agree that objectivity in Media practice can never really be absolute. The romanticized notion that

media can indeed achieve objectivity, especially in my part of the world remains a fragment of one's imagination – reality is a totally different ball-game. This is because while you pursue objectivity, then you need to consider all other aspects of a particular operational media. You need to look at;-

- Commercial Interests
- Target audience/readership
- Personal biases of media practitioners e.g. tribal & party affiliations.

So if indeed these are the factors that define Media operations, if indeed commercial interests is primarily what drives the media world, why pray tell me do we sugar-coat journalist as the noble profession that aims to;-

- Inform
- Educate
- Entertain

Why then shouldn't we have "*To trade* " at the top of the hierarchy of the role of the media?

However, the media has never really shied away from admitting that indeed, it is about business. This commercial aspect of the media is what sharply contrasts its other roles especially after crisis and conflict and the media has been vastly blamed for sins of omission or commission. This under the backdrop of the media's noble claims to serve amidst the sometimes "obvious" goals to simply make profit.

However, world over, media expectations almost border on some "saint hood" of sorts. Many at times, when assuming its superior role as watchdog and advocate for truth, society has bestowed upon the media the responsibility of indeed as earlier doubted?...of saving the world!

This is so in that after things go wrong, no wonder then every shift towards the media is that of accusation and blame with everybody asking; “Where was the media when all these were going on?”. Such was the situation in Kenya after the post-elections violence.

And ladies and gentlemen, such was the dilemma and turmoil within the hearts of credible journalists whose fibre of dedication to the profession was badly shaken when things went terribly wrong.

Jerry again in his commentary;- *Media objectivity is an illusion the world over* once again takes a shot at those who expect a bit too much from members of the fourth estate. He says;- “ *let me tell all concerned something they need to know . Media do not exist as manna from heaven. Media cannot be our Red Cross, our World Vision or doctors without borders. They are certainly not Christian missionaries out in strange lands to search for and save lost souls out in Africa’s “dark continent” . They are simply commercial entities out to make a profit...*)

The brave “witness” breaks down:

I will tell you something about myself. I got encouraged into journalism way back in July 1993 after the death of four journalists covering war in Somalia. It is where the Dan Eldon legacy unfolded. I salute him and the other four who died in pursuit of a life-saving story. The four were there to tell the world the truth about what was happening in Somalia, to urge the world to pause and take action to save the millions of suffering people of Somalia; the four were there to change the world for Somalia.

I must confess that the anger I felt then as a young girl, wondering why the heck someone would want to kill someone who has come to save them is what intrigued me to join journalism – my initial thought then was that this world is so

messed up that it could really do with the brave services of more journalists who come in to preach some sanity in a very insane world. A journalist was born deep down in my heart.

It is where the urge to be a “messenger of hope; the voice of the voiceless” stems from – the call to want to change the world.

In Africa, where communities face many challenges in all aspects, journalists assume many hats of being “world changers”. They report in the conflict zones and become witnesses to some of the worst atrocities in the world, they stay put because they do believe that their coverage can indeed make a difference; in the dungeons of severe poverty, hunger, disease and natural calamities, journalists wear the hats of “slum correspondents”, they become the foot soldiers, fighting to change the world for the suffering people within their zones; In the corridors of power where intrigues of bad governance and mismanagement of economies walk hand in hand, journalists risk their security by digging into files and sneaking into clandestine deals that feature a few individuals pocketing billions at the expenses of the already suffering multitudes , here journalists wear the watch-dog hats with the unrelenting determination of exposing corruption and standing for truth and for justice.

The most peculiar thing ladies and gentlemen, when you grab a couple of these journalists and ask them why they risk so much to do what they do, none of them will tell you it is because they want to earn a million bucks, none will tell you that it is about adding the extra zeroes on their pay slips, none. All they will say is that it is because they are pursuing truth; they are seeking justice; they want to restore hope and unity of man-kind – explanations that all border on saving the world.

A fairly young free lance journalist in Kenya Frank Odwesso, scrapped all his savings after the post-election violence and shot a really valuable documentary titled “*Witness*” in honour of the Kenyans who fell during the post elections violence. His focus was on interviewing journalists who were present, who toiled day and night to bring out the truth of that sad flawed election experience, those who risked so much to bring out the stories even as the conflict boiled over. Frank was giving the messenger the opportunity to tell his/her own story.

It is in “*Witness*” that the restless souls of journalists seeking a deeper meaning to the profession arises.:-

“I forgot I was a journalist and cried for my country as I cursed the politicians. I called the government spokesman and started shouting at him, what are you people doing to the country? (Sarah Kimani, SABC – Nairobi)

“They were attacking us but look we were there to do tell a story. We are the mouth piece of the people, if we do not tell the story, then who will?” (Ann Mawadhe – BBC, Nairobi).

“ This is the greatest test of our (media) time...not 2007..it is between now and what happens before the next elections of 2012..and if the media like any other institution in the country does not arise to the expectations , then we have failed..” (Myself).

Yes, journalists are supposedly not messiahs to save the world, they are probably not there as manna from heaven but if you ask the foot soldiers themselves, those who burn the midnight oil thinking of new entries to a story

that would at least shake the establishment to some action – the few lines that they will pen, the few slots in a script is to them a life-saving venture – it has very little or nothing at all of the commercial aspect of the profession.

To Re-define the profession?

My submission today therefore goes into tapping into the spirits and passions of those journalists who care enough to indeed swim against the current and attempt to “save the world”...or at least the world within their little zones where they work.

In Africa, the role of the media goes much deeper than merely reporting occurrences. What can stand between starving communities and their next meal could be a story done in the paper; what can determine whether police clamp down on thugs who have harassed residents to desperation, could be a 2 minute TV clip in the news; what can actually help to empower the community about their very basic human rights is edged on the sustainable determination of the media inventing an re-inventing new ways of empowering the communities about these rights and what can stand between a night of stolen votes and a people’s destiny could be daring journalists who refuse to go to sleep and dare to tally the votes alongside the officials designated to execute the job.

“To empower” - To give power to the people through empowering them with the right information. Empowerment goes beyond informing and educating. Empowerment has some aspect of persistence and advocacy in it.

These are the grounds where the media is officially not supposed to step in – advocacy. They say, leave the advocacy to the civil society and other stake

holders but in Africa where news is defined by persistent suffering of its populace, advocacy and journalism make perfect bed-mates because it is through advocacy by the media that we begin to count the successes. Through advocacy, indeed the power of the media CAN NEVER BE UNDERESTIMATED!!!

Reclaiming the “soul” in Journalism:

It is my hope that in attempting to re-define our role, we shall tap into the passion of what drives those journalists whose dedication into the profession goes beyond simply making profit.

It is my sincere hope that we will not condemn them as “mad” those journalists who have literally sacrificed their lives at the battle fields, who have been incarcerated for pursuing truth, those who have been angry enough to dare through their work speak against draconian states and tyrannical regimes, those who have held the hands of the sick, the destitute and the suffering by refusing to let the story die just because the world has moved on to other technological innovations and forgot the conventional way of telling a story as it is.

Reclaiming the soul in Journalism might involve, sometimes flouting the rules of practice and engagement, because in my part of the world, the heart of the story is what drives the end product especially in human interest reporting. Journalism teaches well, the importance of keeping the heart out of the story, but those of you who cover suffering and desperation know that this is a pretty challenging rule to follow especially since you know that as a journalist you are after all a human being and if you cut me, I bleed!

Technology is zooming past us even as we speak right now and we are beginning to mourn the death of conventional mainstream media, the very same media practices that do so much to actually change the tide of things. In Africa and other developing worlds, the traditional media still holds a lot of influence

and they should indeed be strengthened to assume a more-pro-active role in setting the agenda for change. It is what is needed especially now when citizen journalism has taken centre stage in cyberspace.

Suddenly, anybody who owns a phone/computer can claim to be a journalist! How are the real journalists going to rise up and defend their positions and retain the sacredness of the profession?

CONCLUSION:

I conclude by begging your indulgence in seeking to break new ground on how to re-define the basic roles of what this great profession is about. This according to me will require, re-thinking and re-strategising media practice or sometimes, reclaiming that which we lost in the name of pursuing academic discourse that is a far-cry from actual media practice. I shall explain my road map briefly;-

1. Enhancing the capacity of the media by infusing passion that is necessary to do that which may not be professionally acceptably “to change the world”. This is a sure way of reclaiming the soul in the profession.
2. Adopting advocacy and empowerment tactics in coverage especially in areas where the media is tasked heavily with the many challenges of broken societies both economically, socially and politically.
3. As veteran Journalist Kwamchetsi Makokha puts it in his report, *The Dynamics of Politics & Media in Kenya*, there is need for public interest media that provides information, sets agenda and listens to the people.

4. Whoever has the solution to policing cyberspace to go right ahead and to indeed move quickly to ensure that regulating the cyberspaces is indeed possible.

5. The mainstream media needs to strengthen its monitoring and regulation base as well, as Kwamchetsi rightfully states; “ *The media cannot legitimately claim to pursue accountability on everybody’s part when it is not accountable itself*”.

References:

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