KENYA MEDIA WEEK
2019 REPORT

Transitions in journalism definitions, business models and practice

Edited by Wambui Wamunyu, PhD
Table of Contents

Preface 3
Introduction 4
The past as a teacher 5
The restrictions and opportunities of the political economy 7
The new players 10
Journalism training 11
Conclusion and recommendations 12
References 13
The Kenya Media Week 2019 (KMW2019) was launched at a one-day conference in August 2019 and was subsequently held over three days in November 2019. The events brought together a range of media fraternity members – including journalists, content creators, bloggers, media entrepreneurs, researchers, and interested citizens - who discussed contemporary journalism from various perspectives.

Hosted by Media Focus on Africa (MFA), KMW2019 was the second such event since 2018 and was designed to enable reflection and discussion around contemporary journalism. Through master classes, panel discussions, and presentations, the participants talked to one another, tried various technologies, tested new skills, and tabled ideas.

This report captures aspects of the event as it reflects on the expression and value of contemporary journalism in Kenyan society. The financial survival of the profession – disrupted in large part by digital technologies’ influence on practices and audience behavior – remained an important topic with the first presentation focused on non-profit journalism alternatives in the digital age. This launched a panel discussion that led to a heated debate about who should be considered a journalist. The heat generated between self-taught and university-trained practitioners illuminated how journalism stands at the intersection of change and further, what times of transition do: they destabilise established names, definitions, skills, and practices, and present new opportunities and ethical challenges.

Subsequent sessions built on this foundation and an outcome of the event was the view that future Kenya Media Week sessions should continue to draw in a more diverse range of participants, while enabling busy journalists and content creators to network and learn new skills. KMW2019 also provided an opportunity to consider different perspectives, to understand the progress made in contemporary journalism while anticipating its future.

We thank and acknowledge Dr. Wamunyu for the wonderful job of compiling and editing this report.
In the past year, Kenyan journalism labour has experienced a range of challenges, including mass retrenchments in a struggling economy, constant dynamism in technological tools, and continued tensions in newsrooms. There is a generational gap between older, more experienced scribes and younger, more tech-savvy content creators. There are ill-equipped research desks in newsrooms and yet constant pressure on journalists and newsrooms to verify and stay accurate, while working on converged platforms. The pressure extends to journalism training where curricula have struggled to keep up with the changes in the media ecosystem.

On a more positive note, various digital platforms have enabled the entry of new players such as media entrepreneurs and allowed for a greater representation of diverse ideological and critical views. New types of journalism work, such as fact-checking and data journalism, have begun to entrench themselves more deeply in legacy and alternative media spaces. It is in this context that KMW2019 was held, allowing room for reflection and learning about journalism’s needs today and potential for the future.

**THEME 2018**

Expanding Spaces, New Voices, Financing Models.

**THEME 2019**

Expanding Digital Spaces for Journalism.
Discussions about technological disruptions in journalism today often revolve around the changing gadgets, platforms and infrastructures. However, the instincts and interactions among the people working in it remain very similar across generations.

In the first discussion of Kenya Media Week 2019, a heated debate emerged among participants as to who could be identified as a journalist. Are bloggers journalists? Should they be considered to be? There were two key camps that emerged, one saying that the true journalist is one who has undergone training in the profession while the other said that a journalist is anyone who makes a contribution towards the development and sharing of news.

The question as to who may be identified as a journalist is not new. Modern-day journalism found expression in Kenya during colonial times. In this season, the state experienced the entry of a variety of new technologies including film, radio, newspapers, and pamphlets. These media were introduced by the Westerners who had arrived as missionaries, settlers, and the colonial administration. But the media did not remain in that exclusive domain. The printing press in particular was soon appropriated by Africans and Asians, who developed their own newspapers and print publications in their own particular style. Leading publishers of the day included individuals who held prominent political positions in the pre- and post-Independence eras.

For example, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and Jomo Kenyatta were leading publishers of newspapers in the first half of the 20th century. Odinga, who would become Kenya’s first vice president, was the chairman of the Luo Thrift and Trading Corporation. This was a business set up in the 1940s to break business domination by the Europeans and Asians and to promote economic self-reliance among Africans. Its various assets included buildings in Kisumu, posho mills, and the Ramogi Press, which for a period printed multiple African newspapers including Ramogi, Nyanza Times, Mulinvoosi, Radio Posta, Sauti ya Mwafrika, and Mumenyieri (Odhiambo, 1997).

Kenyatta had a stint as publisher but also contributed to discussions around the nature of the content in those publications. As a
leading political figure in the colonial period, he had strong opinions on the right of Europeans to reside in Kenya. But he also observed that those views were sometimes misrepresented, and he called for newspaper correspondents to print information as it was spoken. “… [Kenyatta’s] comment addressed the changing roles and rules of oral and written communication in a growing public sphere. The fluidity and pleasures of word of mouth were risky and were increasingly replaced with the discipline of verbatim reportage” (Frederiksen, 2006, p. 295).

But the work of those local publishers was not always viewed favourably. H.C.E Downes, a government press officer in the colonial government, dismissed the African papers, describing them as the “gutter press of Kenya” (Frederiksen, 2006, p. 295). Among his reasons were that these papers often used uncensored letters, a blend of news and opinion, and audience members would sometimes cover events and political matters. It is a so-called hybridization of content and style – blending classic and new forms – which Frederiksen (2006) observed was used by different editors and publishers, including Kenyatta and Odinga.

Today, hybridization of content and style is a classic component of modern-day journalism and content creation, enabled by online technologies such as the Web. Blogs, vlogs and social media posts are contemporary genres that often comprise a blend of news and opinion, audience coverage of events, and uncensored posts. The Standard’s UReport (standardmedia.co.ke/ureport/) is a case in point, actively encouraging stories from outside the newsroom with its slogan ‘You see it uReport it.’ This non-traditional journalism is part of the reason the question on who may be considered a journalist provoked such a heated discussion during the first event of KMW2019.

Sambuli (2015) had observed that with the entry of digital technologies in journalism, there was a dismissive attitude accorded to citizen journalists by members of the mainstream media and government. Citizen journalism was described as “amateurish … lacks quality and that, often, content is not verified before being disseminated” (Sambuli 2015, p. 74). The citizen journalists’ integrity and credibility were also called into question with skeptics noting that “in some cases, bloggers and citizen journalists have published false and sometimes defamatory information” (Sambuli, 2013, p. 74).

The two illustrations from the colonial and digital eras speak to some similarities worth considering. They indicate that new technologies disrupt existing ways of working, cause tensions between the older, established players and newer entrants who make their own rules when appropriating the technologies, and offer new opportunities.

Examples of these transformations were evident all through the Kenya Media Week 2019. There were the professionals who self-identify within newsrooms as ‘content creators,’ distinguishing themselves from ‘journalists.’ The former tend to be younger, more tech-savvy, and willing to experiment with different digital forms and technologies. The latter are the more typical role such as a reporter or editor at a legacy media outlet. Both groups attended the KMW2019.

Other examples included master class trainers Alex Chamwada and Emmanuel Yegon. Chamwada made the transition from legacy media journalist to independent news production house owner while Yegon graduated from university to focus exclusively on producing and distributing mobile journalism content.

These individuals, the names they have given their roles and work exposed the different forms journalism continues to take in this age.

H.C.E Downes, a government press officer in the colonial government, dismissed the African papers, describing them as the “gutter press of Kenya”
African journalists and content creators operate in particular political and economic environments. From colonial times to the present day, African media players have experienced significant changes ranging from repressive regimes unpredictable changes of leadership, continued economic dependence on the West, and significant societal challenges. These would then be followed by demands for greater political freedoms and multi-partyism, which led to the emergence of a non-State controlled media, and the beginning of media pluralism in the 1990s (Berger, 2012; Karikari, 2007; Ogola, 2011).

In Kenya for example, the history of the mainstream news media dates back to the establishment of the print press in the late 1800s with the subsequent introduction of radio and television in 1928 and 1962 respectively. During colonial rule there were publications that were divided along the lines of the interests of the indigenous people and the colonial settlers. By 1952, when the colonial government imposed a State of Emergency due to increasing unrest and Mau Mau activity, there were about 50 newspapers, most of them published and written by African pro-Independence politicians (Mwesige & Kalinaki, 2007).

One of the most successful of these publications was Múmenyereri, published by Henry Muoria, a self-taught journalist and supporter of Jomo Kenyatta. In its heyday, Múmenyereri would sell 2,000 copies produced at a cost of 20 cents per paper with Muoria taking 6 cents home in profit (Frederiksen, 2006). But the colonial government subsequently banned these indigenous publications during the Emergency, and they did not re-emerge.

However, publications such as The Standard survived and others such as the Daily Nation launched allowing the continuation of private enterprise in the print media sector. However, the broadcast sector – radio and television – remained under government ownership until the early 1990s.

Political changes then led to a media liberalisation that enabled the entry of new players such as privately owned FM radio stations. It is during this liberalisation period that a plethora of new commercial media organisations, particularly broadcast outlets, emerged and Kenyan news media begun to adopt the use of the web (Abuoga & Mutere, 1988; Communications Authority of Kenya, n.d., Githaiga, Minnie, & Bussiek, 2011; Karikari, 2007; Loughran, 2010; Mbeke, Ugangu & Okello-Orlale, 2010; Mwesige & Kalinaki, 2007; Ogola, 2013; Ugangu, 2012).
These media outlets flourished in the immediate liberalisation period, and the commercial press grew to include radio stations, which were the news medium with the largest reach countrywide in Kenya, as well as multi-platform companies comprised of print and broadcast outlets (Mbeke et al., 2010; Nyabuga & Booker, 2013). But as digital technologies entrenched themselves, enabling audiences to have extensive access to a wide range of free content, the commercial success of the media houses began to falter.

A study of one Kenyan commercial news organization indicated how well the organization had thrived in that season of disruption, partly because it had invested in expanding its audiences online and broadcast. It also recognized the need to expand its revenue streams early. Beyond advertising on its online and broadcast platforms, it engaged in event live-streaming, had a division to support clients in social media promotion, and worked with a telecommunications company and third-party partner to provide mobile phone news alerts, among other activities. The company also made extensive use of free or open-source digital tools, which reduced its production costs even while presenting products that were comparable to those produced by large, global news outlets (Wamunyu, 2017).

An over-riding concern in the business of contemporary journalism is how the for-profit media house can make money when traditional sources of revenue are in decline and have been disrupted by digital platforms. This challenge is made worse by the prevailing economic climate and a regulatory climate that has made expensive demands. The television broadcasting sector for example, switched from analogue to digital signals in 2015, and a standoff between government and several large commercial broadcasters had led to a shutdown of the television stations for several months.

Revenues had taken a big hit in the digital era. For example, in a 2015 half-year investor briefing, the then Nation Media Group Chief Executive Officer Joe Muganda indicated that its newspaper division revenues had gone down by 1% (due to both declines in advertising and circulation); radio revenues down by 13%; and television advertising revenues went down by 30%, largely because of the digital migration period (February – April 2015) when NTV among other stations went off air. Some of the operating costs went to purchasing new digital equipment related to the migration. Even then online content was not generating revenues.

“One of the challenges we face is that everybody wants content online for free, and we are a business,” said Muganda. Yet digital readership – on the company’s websites and social media pages - were also going up and a key focus was attracting younger audiences. “As we migrate to a younger readership we are working towards that and going in the right direction.”

That was in 2015. Since then, a growing number of news items pointed to layoffs and job cuts in different commercial media houses. In the last quarter of 2019, two leading media houses laid off an estimated 300 employees across departments including editorial. There have been reports of companies firing then rehiring employees on lower pay, and widespread use of interns on extended contracts, showing the extent to which companies are seeking to cut costs. In the COVID-19 era, these layoffs and pay cuts have only increased, exposing the fragility of the legacy media even while enabling digital journalism forms to thrive.

Financial disruptions in the media sector featured during the KMW2018 where a roundtable discussion focused on the declines in advertising and subscription revenues for commercial media houses. Yet it is in this period that new alternatives have emerged and seem to be thriving. During
the first event of KMW2019, a presentation titled ‘Digital media trends: The non-profit news alternative’ focused on this question: are non-profit digital news platforms the alternative for in depth, authoritative, and investigative coverage of matters of great public interest in Kenya?

The evidence shows that these platforms offer a viable alternative, even in our dynamic political environment and market-based economy damaged by runaway corruption and anti-public interest financial excesses. Organizations such as The Elephant, The Conversation Africa, and Code for Kenya have emerged, supported by digital technologies and fueled by failures/limitations of the mainstream press. They get funding from donors and partners among other sources, and have contributed new types of content including data journalism, research-focused articles, and stories that analyze budgets, and how public monies are used (such as the Standard Gauge Railway).

Audiences of these digital outlets have also shown that they are willing to consume long-form, analytical or investigative pieces that are about their daily lives. Additionally, the audiences appreciate compelling, well-packaged, context-filled, local content, and are unafraid to contribute and respond to news content. Younger audiences are also increasing in number and access content differently (online/digital platforms, on-demand) than those in earlier generations.

Muoria, the newspaper entrepreneur, had understood how to reach his audience in the 1940s. His 2,000-paper print run would run out. At a time when literacy levels were very low. The paper was written in the Gikuyu language and covered political issues, meetings, speeches by government and settler representatives, notices of missing persons, advertisements, stories about Muoria’s travels, gender interactions, women’s equality, and issues relating to Gikuyu life, and letters from the public.

Contemporary journalism has incorporated the use of social media who take content from legacy media forms or digitally-exclusive content and promote it across platforms. This content, when it is local, comprehensively reported and packaged engagingly tends to be well received by audiences.

Infographics, which have acquired great visibility in the COVID-19 era, are a case in point. Using simple graphics, information culled from a variety of sources, and minimal text, journalists in legacy or digital media have told important stories in the public interest.

It therefore suggests that journalists and content creators need to invest in great, comprehensively researched, well-packaged relevant local content. The various social media applications are an important location for the creation and distribution of news and other content. Funding matters, but a wider range of revenue sources and cost-cutting measures may be worth considering such as donor funding, sharing resources among media houses through partnerships (Africa Uncensored producing content published on The Elephant), crowd-sourcing information and stories (such as UReport on The Standard website), and non-editorial revenue streams (such as events). Paywalls and subscription models came up for discussion during KMW2019 with the conclusion that they would require high-quality, well-researched local content not available elsewhere.
Among the highlights of KMW2019 were the presentations and master classes. The response to them – and a post-mortem analysis of the event – led to the conclusion that these sessions need to be made more available to all journalists in the course of a Kenya Media Week event.

Mobile journalism proponent Emmanuel Yegon and independent production house owner Alex Chamwada walked participants through mobile journalism and the daring to think out of the box as a media entrepreneur. These sessions led to very lively interactions, some prizes, and the clear need to provide new skills to new and practicing journalists and content creators.

The responses from the participants of KMW2019 indicated that the event value lies in going beyond thinking theoretically about the future of journalism. It is a place to also enable practical interaction with emerging tools and concepts. An important opportunity that KMW2019 provided was allowing different generations of journalists and content creators to learn from one another and understand each other’s experiences. Sarah Kaminja - who works at a legacy media house’s digital platform and describes herself as a content-creator – described KMW2019 as an opportunity to understand the progress the media sector has made away from the digital perspective.

There are other technologies that are yet to take root in the Kenyan media ecosystem including block chain and Artificial Intelligence. If a robot/bot can push content on social media and write a story using a clear formula (sports stories are easily generated by robots because they are based on scores), is that something the Kenyan journalist should be concerned about? If so, what work is then left for the (human) journalist? Those are among the questions Kenya Media Week can concern itself with in times to come. This will enable content creators and practicing journalists as well as those in training to anticipate and prepare for the future.
An often-ignored aspect of journalism is training. KMW2019 brought together reporters, editors, bloggers, and content creators who spoke about the converged newsroom, the need to learn new skills, use digital gadgets and applications, while building audiences, staying relevant, and remaining ethical. Other research has raised this as legacy journalists previously focused on generating news for one platform are now required to generate broadcast and online stories, or work alongside digital creators producing web and mobile content.

There were few journalism trainers and faculty present at KMW2019 yet they are important players in helping develop the professionals who can take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the digital space. The training should not only focus on technical skills – such as how to use a smartphone to take videos – but also expose students to experiences and content that will develop strong critical thinking skills, ethical standards, professional networks, self-confidence and news judgement. As Harrison Manga observed, Kenya Media Week is an opportunity to look ahead, focus on what the future can look like, and explore workable practical ideas to keep journalism relevant.

An outstanding feature of KMW2019 was the number of young people in attendance, some of them in the journalism profession while others were not. But they were all there, a ready audience made up of potential content creators and journalists. There are opportunities for training institutions to reach that pool of people, and enable them to make valuable contributions to the profession of journalism. Additionally, faculty and researchers have the opportunity to engage in research that addresses contemporary and future journalism problems, documents the successes and failures of the age, and opening up journalism programs to serve as laboratories that can test audience engagement, revenue-generation models, and new content genres.

Emmanuel Yegon – who ran a master class on Mobile Journalism at KMW2019 – observed that the event should be practical, availing training for new and experienced journalists, such as in using different digital tools and exploring various storytelling forms.
The media – legacy or digital – have an important role to play in society. They provide independent, credible information and critical analysis, open platforms for debate and discussion, and serve as a watchdog of society over powerful interests. In this way, they enable citizens to identify themselves as conscious, well-informed global players and citizens. This contribution cannot be refuted particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, where information from credible sources such as the different media has contributed towards advised decision-making, the saving of lives, and the exposure of injustices and weaknesses in public policy and institutions.

In the Kenyan context, the dominant media have been for-profit institutions with multiple media platforms serving the for-profit interests of shareholders or private owners. While in the past these entities have enjoyed explosive growth in advertising revenue (Mbeke et al, 2010), their fortunes have since changed as they experience declines in advertising, circulations/rating, and audience numbers.

There have been two prevalent presumptions about the media. One is the only viable model for media is as a for-profit company, whose product is the content that is presented to audiences. This is what has constituted the mainstream/legacy media in Kenya. The other is that ‘freedom of the press’ may refer to a media free from government or political control. But it is not necessarily free from commercial controls or other biases.

The dynamics in today’s media landscape show that there should no longer be any presumptions about journalism. Who may be defined as a journalist remains an evolving issue. What journalists can do has broadened while creating new opportunities and niches e.g. mobile journalism. What comes next becomes an opportunity for which contemporary journalists can anticipate and prepare.

To this end, KMW2019 provided a platform for the exchange of local knowledge and ideas. It also prepares the way for future forums to be inclusive, participatory, cognizant of the contemporary, and actively anticipating of the future.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

- more practical sessions for hands-on training
- having parallel sessions to allow for a greater variety of topics
- aim for a less formal tone and approach to appeal to a greater number of young participants
- consider topics that are pertinent to the time. In this season for example, layoffs, making money online, managing newsroom change and generational differences within newsrooms are relevant to legacy media journalists some of whom are transitioning to digital media careers.
- Enable people to gain a new technical skill through the master classes
- Consider running the event virtually to reach a wider pool of journalists, content creators and other interested parties.

As Media Focus on Africa prepares such future events, it should consider the following:


Committed to social change

Green Valley Estate
Convent Drive, off J.Gichuru rd
P.O. Box 660-00606
Nairobi, Kenya
info@mediafocusonafrica.org
tel: +254 711 403 555
www.mediafocusonafrica.org

---

Committed to social change

Supported by:

[Logo: National Endowment for Democracy]

Supporting freedom around the world