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30+

YEARS AFTER WINDHOEK

Re-examining media freedom
in a changing world

Edited by Daniel Kalinaki and George Nyabuga





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in a changing world**

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About the Eastern Africa Editors Society

The Eastern Africa Editors Society is the umbrella body bringing together editor organisations in Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, namely: Ethiopia Editors' Guild, Kenya Editors' Guild, Uganda Editors' Guild and Tanzania Editors Forum.

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Introduction

Thirty years after Windhoek, what has really changed?

Daniel K. Kalinaki

When 60 African journalists met in Windhoek in May 1991, they had many reasons to be optimistic about media freedom on the continent. The winds of change that had ended the Cold War and blown away the Berlin Wall had stirred a palpable sense of optimism across the globe.

The crumbling of the Soviet Union appeared to have settled the ideological debate that had divided the world for almost half a century. Western democratic capitalism had triumphed over the Soviet communism.

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such,” Francis Fukuyama, then a policy wonk in the US State Department, had noted in a recent book. Western liberal democracy, he noted, was the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” and would be universalised as “the final form of human government”¹.

African countries had seen the emergence of nationalist movements which, after World War II, led to a wave of declarations of independence. In 1960 alone, 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa gained independence from their European colonial masters.

These reforms were short-lived, however. Across Africa, the political elite that had led the struggle for independence almost invariably converted that legitimacy into single-party states, often under the guise of creating unity and nation-building. Jomo Kenyatta and the Kenya Africa National Union, Julius Nyerere and the Tanganyika African National Union, Kenneth Kaunda and the United National Inde-

¹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, 1989.



The end of the Cold War brought at least three notable changes. The first was an increase in the number of private newspaper publishers, including those founded by economic punters and by political actors seeking to influence public opinions.

pendence Party, among others, represented this move.

This consolidation of political power required and resulted in the consolidation of media, or the continuation of the government-mouthpiece model under most colonial governments. Thus, the media in Africa between 1960 and 1990, largely mirrored the dominant one-party state.

By the time of the Windhoek meeting, however, the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union was being felt across Africa, including the wave of Western liberal democracy. Just over a year earlier, Namibia had declared independence and had written into law one of the most progressive constitutions on the continent, guaranteeing several rights, including the freedom of expression.

Even South Africa, the next-door-neighbour and the last bastion of white supremacist rule and repression, was giddy with the sense of possibility. After years of isolation, the country's Nadine Gordimer had won the Nobel Prize for Literature, only a year after Nelson Mandela had been released from 27 years in prison.

One-party rule was giving way to pluralist political systems, even in Africa. In multiparty elections in 1991 in Benin, Mathieu Kerekou lost to Nicephore Soglo, before trade-unionist Frederick Chiluba defeated Kaunda in Zambia the same year.

The opening up of the political space was matched by the lifting of nationalist and socialist controls on economies to allow foreign investment, privatisation, and the dismantling of controls on the movement of capital.

Many private media houses had continued to publish – they were almost invariably newspapers and pamphlets – across the continent, even during the Cold War, but the dominant broadcast platforms, especially radio, remained almost exclusively in control of the State and the single political party in charge.

The end of the Cold War brought at least three notable changes. The first was an increase in the number of private newspaper publishers, including those founded by economic punters and by political actors seeking to influence public opinions.



Innovation remains key to success and many publishers struggling to convert legacy operations into digital-first enterprises will be watching the Daily Maverick digital-to-print journey with keen interest.

The second was the liberalisation of the broadcasting space as private players were finally granted television and radio broadcast licences, breaking the grip that state broadcasters had enjoyed for decades.

The third was an attempt to defend media freedom and codify protections against journalists, many of whom had suffered the brunt of the one-party state and its coercive instruments when they did not toe the nationalist line. The 60 African journalists who met in Windhoek between April 29 and May 3, 1991, under the aegis of Unesco, discussed the role of independent and pluralist media across the continent, and issued a declaration that would centre media freedom and plurality in international rights discourse.

“The declaration was adopted in 1991 in a climate of optimism,” Gwen Lister, co-founder of *The Namibian* newspaper and one of the journalists at Windhoek, recalls. “It was due, in most part, to Namibia’s newfound freedom, the slow unravelling of apartheid in South Africa as well as growing resistance to African dictatorships and development-type autocratic regimes.”²

Thirty years later, we look back to Windhoek in this edition of the *Eastern Africa Journalism Review*, to reflect on how much has changed and how much more needs to be done to expand media freedom and plurality across the continent.

There has been progress. Take plurality, for example. In her article on the formless and evolving nature of journalism, Christine Mungai explores new forms of doing journalism, including virtually without newsrooms, printing presses or even websites, as *The Conversation* does, to reflect on how technology has eliminated entry barriers into the industry.

Changes in audience preferences have shifted power away from legacy industries and players, into the hands of technology giants, search engines and other media-focused or content-hosting platforms. Yet as Styli Charalambous, the publisher of the *Daily Maverick* in South Africa shares, there might still be life left in old

² Gwen Lister, interview with Unesco, available at <http://en.unesco.org> last accessed on August 10, 2021.



Eric Kabendera, a Tanzanian investigative journalist, shares a first-hand account of the harassment he faced under former President John Pombe Magufuli, including attempted kidnap and trumped-up charges of money-laundering.

formats, such as the printed newspaper, if it is interesting enough for readers and is distributed in clever ways. Innovation remains key to success and many publishers struggling to convert legacy operations into digital-first enterprises will be watching the *Daily Maverick* digital-to-print journey with keen interest.

However, the general direction of travel is one that raises concern. Consider, for instance, safety of journalists. In 1992, when the UN, prompted by the Windhoek communique declared May 3 World Press Freedom Day, there were 113 journalists in jail worldwide, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. In 2020, there were 274 journalists imprisoned around the world.

This trend is mirrored on the continent. In 1992, there were only four African journalists in jail, and in only four countries: Sudan, Algeria, Rwanda and Burundi. By last year, there were 78 journalists imprisoned in 11 African countries, including eight in Cameroon.

Prof George Nyabuga's essay explores how much progress has been made in the three decades since Windhoek to try and defend and expand media freedom. The prognosis isn't rosy. Journalists continue to be harassed, arrested, jailed and killed by governments emboldened by impunity and a rolling back of many of the democratic reforms that followed the end of the Cold War.

A lot of it is due to impunity. Eric Kabendera, a Tanzanian investigative journalist, shares a first-hand account of the harassment he faced under former President John Pombe Magufuli, including attempted kidnap and trumped-up charges of money-laundering. He is alive today and free to share his story: Azory Gwanda, another Tanzanian journalist disappeared in 2017 while investigating extra-judicial killings in the country. He has not been seen since.

Despite a new president in Tanzania, many of the draconian laws introduced by President Magufuli remain on the books, a reminder that while restraints on media freedom are often quickly imposed, it often takes longer and a lot more effort to have them removed.



With vaccination rates remaining low in Africa, it is feasible that the coronavirus pandemic, now well into its second year, will continue to disrupt life in many African countries. Journalists in countries scheduled to hold elections soon, including Kenya, Cape Verde, Chad and Morocco, are well advised to understand the perils of covering polls during pandemics, as seen in Uganda, and find clever ways to respond to the challenges.

Those in power are often quick to take advantage of unforeseen developments to curtail civil liberties and media freedom. For instance, after the September 11 terror attacks on the US, many countries rolled back freedoms under the cover of anti-terror legislation. The coronavirus pandemic has offered similar cover.

Verah Okeyo, a health journalist, offers a first-hand account of covering a pandemic from the frontlines, the lack of preparation it revealed in newsrooms in Kenya and in many countries of the continent, as well as initiatives that can equip media houses to improve their coverage of science.

Mostly, it is governments that have been quick to use pandemic-related restrictions to curtail media freedom and political contestations. In examining research about media coverage of the General Election in Uganda, Dr Peter G. Mwesige shows how the pandemic undermined the media's ability to interrogate electoral promises, and how the government took advantage to limit the space for media scrutiny.

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Many of these responses require cross-border collaboration. Churchill Otieno, the President of the Kenya Editor's Guild writes about the East African Editor's Society as an initiative to harness the collective power of journalists from across the region – Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia and elsewhere – to provide a united front against attacks on journalists and threats to media freedom.

Political actors across the region have demonstrated a canny ability to learn from one another, be it in how to muzzle the press, or how to remove constitutional term and age limits. It behoves journalists to expand their conversations beyond



geographical borders and find ways to share experiences about how to consolidate and expand media freedom, or business models that allow media sustainability.

The rolling back of term limits and the emergence of military-civilian regimes in Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Somalia and South Sudan represent a new wave of consolidation of power by strong men, often bypassing civilian rule and strong institutions.

Thirty years after the Windhoek Declaration, the media in Africa are more pluralistic, bolder and – at least in the case of social media – more decentralised and democratised. But many of the threats that existed then continue today, and some have, in fact, gotten only worse. The more things have changed since Windhoek, the more they have remained the same. We must not relent the fight for media freedom, or the wider civil liberties promised by Western democratic liberalism.

Winds of change, opportunity and destruction: A reflection on the Windhoek Declaration, 30 years on

George Nyabuga

*The theme of this year's [2021] World Press Freedom Day, "Information as a Public Good", underlines the indisputable importance of verified and reliable information. It calls attention to the essential role of free and professional journalists in producing and disseminating this information, by tackling misinformation and other harmful content. ... I call on everyone to renew their commitment to the fundamental right to freedom of expression, to defend media workers, and to join us in ensuring that information remains a public good. — **Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day**¹*

More than three decades ago on May 3, 1991, the Windhoek Declaration for the Development of a Free, Independent and Pluralistic Press (often just the Windhoek Declaration) was born. The Declaration birthed the World Press Free-

¹ See Audrey Azoulay speech on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377209.locale=en>.



Skyline of Namibia's capital Windhoek.

dom Day in 1993, after the UN General Assembly set May 3 as a date which celebrates the fundamental principles of press freedom. The day is also used to evaluate press freedom around the world, to defend the media from attacks and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession. The day “serves as an occasion to inform citizens of violations of press freedom – a reminder that in dozens of countries, publications are censored, fined, suspended and closed down, while journalists and publishers are harassed, attacked, detained and even murdered. It is a date to encourage and develop initiatives in favour of



press freedom, and to assess the state of press freedom worldwide,” says UNESCO on its website.²

The year 2021 was thus special in many ways. It marked 30 years since the Declaration was born. But it is also a year since Covid-19 was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020. These events are considered to have had significant effects on the media and journalism around the world. Nonetheless, given the importance of the media in society, and threats to press freedom around the world, the day has always been special to journalists regardless of the situation. In fact, a look into postwar period indicates that the Windhoek Declaration was born out of struggles that the world and journalists faced. It is thus not lost to discerning analysts that the Declaration came into being slightly more than a year after Namibia gained independence from South Africa on March 21, 1990. It was also in 1989 that the Berlin Wall fell, setting in motion a series of events that changed the world. It was a watershed moment in the history of the world, marking, in the words of the American political scientist and scholar, political economist, and writer Francis Fukuyama, the end of history. In his 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama posited that the triumph of liberal democracy at the end of the Cold War marked the last ideological stage in the progression of human history. The book was born out of his 1989 journal article – *The End of History?* – for the summer edition of *The National Interest*, in which he argued that liberal democracy constituted the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” and the “final form of human government”, and as such constituted the “end of history”.

The End of History is illustrative of the events of the moment. The Windhoek Declaration and its progeny – the Windhoek +30 Declaration – that came into effect on May 3, 2021 offers great opportunities for spotlighting media issues and especially threats to press freedom. Granted, 30 years is a long time in the life of the media. There are numerous serious changes obtaining the media environment

² See UNESCO (2021) World Press Freedom Day. UNESCO [online], May, 3. Available at <<https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/worldpressfreedomday>>.



the world over, and the media and journalists daily confront new realities that threaten their place and roles.

“Are we on the cusp of a new world order—a new era that will be a significant turning point in world history?” posed Khuloud Al Omian in Middle East edition of the *Forbes* magazine of April 2020, “Or, once we are past this period, will the world go back to the way it was before?” Such critical questions face journalists in the Covid-19 era, and the Windhoek +30 Declaration has come to life when there is an overarching view that things will never be the same again. “Everything will be different,” concludes Al Omian.

Indeed, numerous questions have been asked of the various issues and industries, including the media. Facing various crises – existential, civilisational, credibility, reliability, trust and others – the media is on the edge although that edge (based on various reactions and actions) can trigger a regeneration and reconstitution that would allow it to reclaim its place in society.

Some of these arguments may seem or look simplistic and uninformed, given the complexity of current issues facing society. Yet, there is no gainsaying that the media is in deep trouble and the rise of nationalism and intolerance in parts of the world spell a serious threat to press freedom, things that were in terminal decline as the rebirth of democracy – and the end of history – in the early 1990s raised optimism across the world that liberalism would deliver the world from the throes of oppression and suffocation the Cold War brought upon many countries.

Thirty years is a long time. A lot has changed. Even democracy, the rule of law, constitutionalism and all the beliefs and ideologies emergent out of post-war and post-Cold War troubles seem to be in trouble. So, what is media freedom in comparison to human rights, essential freedoms, democracy and associated principles like accountability and responsibility, begs the question.

“Since 1991, the information landscape has undergone tremendous changes, especially with the advent of the Internet and social media,” argued UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay in her speech during this year’s World Press Freedom



Day, “... (W)e are also facing a rise in misinformation and hate speech, the upending of media business models and the concentration of power in the hands of just a few private companies.”

Indeed, the social, technological, cultural developments, and changes in value systems have strongly affected the place and roles of the media and journalism, and sometimes the media does not stand in the good stead in some societies due to what Ms Azoulay called the growing misinformation and hate speech, spread especially by the popular social media.

Recognising that the media is going through remarkable but also complicated developments, the 2021 World Press Freedom Day focused on three key points: economic viability of news media, transparency of Internet companies, and media and information literacy (MIL). Journalists and other stakeholders from eastern Africa³, under the auspices of the Eastern Africa Editors Society⁴, in partnership with and support from organisations including UNESCO, the Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa and Article 19, convened a series of meetings from April 29 to May 3, expressing views that were part of the Windhoek +30 Declaration. More specifically, the meetings covered a range of issues summarised as follows:

- Media independence is important in any democratic society, and should be protected at all costs. However, the media in the region have and continue to experience serious challenges due to numerous factors, including the State, advertisers, ownership and political interference. State and political pressure is exerted either directly or indirectly through advertisement. Such actions often lead to self-censorship. This is wont to affect public confidence and trust that the media needs.
- Financial independence is vital to the survival of the media

³ The region, in this context, includes countries other than where the Eastern Africa Editors Society draws its membership. Comoros, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda were included in the eastern Africa regional conversations.

⁴ The Society brings together Ethiopia Editors’ Guild, Kenya Editors Guild, Uganda Editors Guild and Tanzania Editors Forum.

he security and safety situation in many eastern Africa countries is deteriorating. A careful examination of counties such as Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and, to some extent, Kenya and Rwanda, reveals that journalists are no longer safe.

and press freedom around the world. However, there are now serious concerns about media sustainability in the region due to numerous factors, including the deteriorating economic situations and the Covid-19 pandemic. These have led to the closure of various media houses, the reduction of workforces and little or no investment in important productions like investigative journalism. To mitigate the challenges, some media houses have erected paywalls. While these strategies are necessary, there are concerns that they deny people without disposable incomes critical information for their everyday practices, decision-making and participation in important democratic activities.

- While regulation is necessary and acceptable, some countries continue to limit press freedom and freedom of expression, using frameworks that are out of sync with modern realities. This is especially worsening in countries that are intolerant to criticism and publication of information labelled dangerous to national security.
- The security and safety situation in many eastern Africa countries is deteriorating. A careful examination of counties such as Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and, to some extent, Kenya and Rwanda, reveals that journalists are no longer safe. The threats include both offline and online. Conflict, political intolerance and Covid-19 are considered to be the main causes of the threats facing journalists. In fact, reports now indicate that the pandemic has exacerbated the threats facing journalists. There are restrictions on the movement of journalists to carry out assignments, state harassment and even physical violence that have affected journalists, and the press freedom in many countries today.
- The working conditions of journalists in the region continues to deteriorate. Internal media house working environments are mostly not conducive to the physical and mental wellbeing



Some countries in the region do not offer appropriate and adequate legal and political protections for the advancement of press freedom and media independence.

of journalists. Reduced workforces and austerity measures by many media houses in attempts to overcome financial challenges continue to put pressure on journalists. This has got worse during the Covid-19 era.

- Women journalists complain of various forms of harassment at the workplace. The more pernicious form is sexual harassment, which continues to affect the psychological or emotional health and wellbeing of female journalists. Sexual harassment includes the use of explicit or implicit overtones and unwelcome and inappropriate promise of rewards in exchange for sexual favours.
- Some countries in the region do not offer appropriate and adequate legal and political protections for the advancement of press freedom and media independence. The deteriorating situation in some of the countries, particularly Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, is often as a consequence of lack of weak or inadequate legal protections, although the State and other actors continue to transgress constitution and legal protection in others.
- Media and information literacy is important in society. Media and information literacy often involves equipping citizens with the competencies and skills to engage effectively and responsibly with the information systems. However, it is felt that media and information are not prioritised and people do not always understand the roles and responsibilities of the media.
- There is opacity and unaccountability in the way online platforms operate. While online platforms are increasingly important as they provide the space and opportunity for sharing information especially in autocratic countries, they have been used to share information that is dangerous to society. Concerns abound about hate speech and disinformation (and other potentially harmful content), especially within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sexual harassment policies should be developed and effected urgently. Such policies will help create a conducive environment for female and other vulnerable groups who are often sexually exploited.

From the issues listed above, a number of recommendations emerged:

1. Media houses must protect their independence. They should initiate internal policies entrenching ethical values and promoting editorial independence, to enhance media integrity and credibility and sustainability.
2. Financial independence is necessary to safeguard the media space. The media should thus develop innovative, but transparent strategies to overcome technological, political and emerging disruptions and pressures. In this context, paywalls are necessary to respond to the viability concerns. This will not only help the media houses to thrive and do independent journalism, but also reduce interference from the State and political and commercial interests. It is only through financial sustainability that the media can remain independent and continue to serve public interest. However, the implementation of such strategies should not restrict people's access to critical information necessary for the functioning of society.
3. Media houses should develop and implement policies to enhance gender equity. This is necessary to enhance gender inclusivity in their spaces.
4. Sexual harassment policies should be developed and effected urgently. Such policies will help create a conducive environment for female and other vulnerable groups who are often sexually exploited.
5. Media houses should ensure there are conducive work conditions for their people. This is borne out of the fact that the people are the biggest resource any organisation has and providing a good environment for work and growth are necessary for promoting credibility and integrity, and thus helping advance media independence viability.
6. Media literacy is important because it enlightens the public on how the industry works. More literate audiences will lead to more critical expectations of media content, which will intrinsically

The State has a critical role to play in guaranteeing the safety and security of media professionals. States should respect press freedom as contained in the Windhoek Declaration because, not only is the media important for the survival of society, it is also critical to the development and consolidation of democracy.

enhance quality. Media and information literacy should be part of school curriculum to ensure children understand and appreciate the role of the media from an early age. In addition, the media should be at the forefront of educating the people on what the information literacy means. This will contribute to people respecting the media and contributing to the enhancement of press freedom.

7. The media, the civil society, governments and other stakeholders should develop friendly laws and policies to promote press freedom. This means ensuring states adopt the Windhoek Declaration. Any transgression on the provisions of the Declaration should be widely reported, and mechanisms and strategies be developed to ensure those culpable are held to account for their actions or indecisions. Instruments such as peer review mechanisms are necessary to hold countries to account for offending press freedom and the freedom of expression provisions. Besides, the review of laws restricting press freedom and freedom of expression is necessary and urgent. What is more, freedom of information and the freedom of expression legislation should be prioritised in countries that do not have them. This means working with such organisations as the African Union and the East African Community to lobby for legislations to enhance the freedoms of information and expression.
8. The State has a critical role to play in guaranteeing the safety and security of media professionals. States should respect press freedom as contained in the Windhoek Declaration because, not only is the media important for the survival of society, it is also critical to the development and consolidation of democracy.
9. The media, like any other essential industry, must be offered stimulus packages, tax breaks and other financial, political, technical and legal support to survive the ravages of economic downturns, the Covid-19 pandemic and other challenges.



The exposition above offers a broad discussion of the issues that the media faces around the world, and the future of the media, despite the existence of such important instruments as the Windhoek +30 Declaration. Of particular focus from the contents of the Windhoek +30 Declaration, is the call on all governments to Commit to creating an enabling environment for the freedom of expression and access to information, online and offline, in line with international guarantees of these rights, through adopting legal measures in a transparent manner and following adequate public consultation, guaranteeing the exercise of journalism free of governmental interference, whether formal or informal, promoting universal access to the Internet, and taking measures to reinforce the safety of journalists, including with a specific focus on women journalists.

The clause above demonstrates the importance of the media in society. It also proves the fact that despite facing numerous challenges, the media is committed to public interest and the provision of information as a public good. This commitment is, of course, also dependent upon various stakeholders – governments, intergovernmental organisations including UNESCO, technology companies, journalists, media outlets, civil society and the academia – working together to ensure that, as the Windhoek +30 Declaration states, press freedom, independence and pluralism remain major goals to guarantee information as a public good.

Unity of purpose: Standing together to safeguard press freedom

Churchill Otieno

Journalists in eastern Africa must “all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately”. These words were Benjamin Franklin’s caution to Americans as they worked on their independence, but they ring so loud and true of the media landscape in the region today.

An increasing number of regional journalists are finding themselves unable to practice independently, or at all, for a variety of reasons. Interference by the State and by commercial interests rank high among factors crippling a free media, but failure of the business model has grown in importance in recent times.

No matter the underlying causes, journalism is not a crime and the people of eastern Africa are owed a constant supply of easily accessible credible information, if democracy is to take root.

Given the sheer number of challenges that abound, it may seem that nothing short of magic will save our journalism. But that doomsday fatalism must not find home in our hearts. No! Instead, committed journalism should look beyond the surviv-

Regular waves of political tension and anxiety always translate to a spike in media threats and attacks, especially in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The situation in some eastern African countries, particularly Tanzania and Ethiopia, is precarious because of a fluid political environment and a leadership increasingly intolerant of criticism and press freedom.

alist mantra and boldly seize the silver opportunity that the cloud of doom masks. It is time to bind as professional journalists and seek new paths that put public interest at the centre.

As professionals, five questions define the opportunity that exists to innovate and grow the space. They all speak to the need to grow regional solidarity as a way to enabling professional excellence and activating group strength.

The **first question** speaks to newsroom safety. We have to be our brothers' keeper. In most newsrooms in the region, even those in big media houses, safety is given little more than lip service. We find little documentation of incidents and rarely do we find safety protocols in place. In some, a holistic awareness – physical, digital, and psychosocial – is lacking.

Regular waves of political tension and anxiety always translate to a spike in media threats and attacks, especially in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The situation in some eastern African countries, particularly Tanzania and Ethiopia, is precarious because of a fluid political environment and a leadership increasingly intolerant of criticism and press freedom. In Tanzania, for example, the media space significantly shrunk and some journalists and media houses have come under intense political pressure to conform or close shop. Some journalists have fled the country because of threats to their lives. A new regime is now in power with early signs of relaxing the clampdown, but it is yet too quick to shower accolades.

In Ethiopia, the situation slowly deteriorated over the last few years as the media was increasingly targeted for offering truthful accounts of emerging political events and conflicts in parts of the country. The current civil war in the Tigray region has now spilled over, not just across the country, but also in media, sucking in many journalists resulting in a dearth of independent reporting.

The Ethiopia case is special. When the current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali took office on April 2, 2018, there was optimism that the country would undergo political metamorphosis. This optimism was based on the fact that immediately he took over, Dr Abiy released from prison journalists, bloggers, opposition poli-



Journalists take to the streets in agitation for media freedom.

ticians and other 'political' prisoners. He unbanned websites and allowed greater freedoms, including that of the media. The return of exiled politicians and journalists to the country, and the appointment of one-time government and ruling party opponents to important positions in government evidenced the changes. The appointment of, for example, Birtukan Mideksa, an opposition leader, who had just returned from exile, to head its election body, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, was seen as a watershed moment in the country's troubled political history.



“In East Africa, newspapers have been shuttered in Tanzania and journalists detained, including in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Rwanda-- all on allegations of having aired or published information deemed false by authorities. This is a worldwide trend,” Mumo says.

However, only years after taking over power, and a year after winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, Dr Abiy’s Ethiopia witnessed the return of conflict, with serious fighting in the Tigray region, which has apparently killed hundreds of people and displaced thousands of others. Other regions are also experiencing unrest. While early political changes seemed promising, the media is again under threat and the country is in a state of flux, given the rising authoritarianism and ethnic tensions. To paraphrase the saying, the first casualty of conflict is truth. Accordingly, by suppressing the media and journalists, Ethiopians and the international community are unable to get the truth from the ground. What’s more, there are fears that further clampdown would be perilous for journalists and the media, posing serious threats to democracy and human rights, regional peace and stability.

It is therefore clear that the socio-economic and political context impacts newsroom safety significantly, and journalists need to take a long-term view and deploy measures to protect their space.

Muthoki Mumo, the CPJ’s sub-Saharan Africa representative, has observed concerning trends that put media freedom at risk in the eastern Africa region. She finds that the fight against misinformation and disinformation has been used as a pretext to retaliate against critical journalism.

“In East Africa, newspapers have been shuttered in Tanzania and journalists detained, including in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Rwanda-- all on allegations of having aired or published information deemed false by authorities. This is a worldwide trend,” Mumo says.

She notes that data from CPJ Prison Census, a snapshot of all journalists imprisoned as at December 1 each year, shows that the number of journalists jailed worldwide on false news charges has been [on the rise](#)¹ over the last several years

¹ <https://cpj.org/reports/2020/12/record-number-journalists-jailed-imprisoned/>

Ethiopian journalist Te'amrat G. Gebremariam sees the challenges as partly global, given that the business model on which journalism was based is in turmoil. "I believe journalism is a casualty of an institutional decline (economically) and cultural war for it is a civic institution.

- from at least [10 journalists in 2015](#)² to at least [34 in 2020](#)³.

The **second question** speaks to the sustainability of independent journalism in the region. Journalism can be fed using a variety of methods. The critical journalism in the region has mostly been supported by advertising. We have seen experimentation with public journalism, privately-owned commercially supported, dalliance with philanthropy, and lately the entry of audience revenue. Nearly all journalists in the region have been trained and weaned on either state-funded or privately-owned commercially funded contexts.

All the other modes come with unfamiliarity with loads of the unknown for newsroom independence in the region. A slowing down of advertising revenues has meant that all forward-oriented media houses must experiment with the new business models, lessons shared across media houses and across national boundaries would help quick adaptation.

Ethiopian journalist Te'amrat G. Gebremariam sees the challenges as partly global, given that the business model on which journalism was based is in turmoil. "I believe journalism is a casualty of an institutional decline (economically) and cultural war for it is a civic institution. The lesson is to rethink the value of journalism as content from the platforms. Its business model is not as viable as had been the case for the last two centuries. The reinvention of sustainable business models through which journalism as content continues to thrive, is the key. We have to restore trust and credibility in the content we deliver."

Gebremariam advances the establishment of a private-public hybrid model. He proffers that redefining journalism as an economic and civic institution for society is a tall order. But one we have to figure out how to do. He says: "We are in the attention economy, competing with forces much broader and wider than

2 https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2020/?status=Imprisoned&charges%5B%5D=False%20News&start_year=2015&end_year=2020&group_by=location

3 https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2020/?status=Imprisoned&charges%5B%5D=False%20News&start_year=2020&end_year=2020&group_by=location

The media industry is faced with economic, cultural and technological challenges. The ecosystem of news has been disrupted. Journalism, as a product for public good, is doubted. The tide is so large and high, recovery requires a new business model, one in which a hybrid of commercial and taxpayers' funds play.

the traditional fronts. The media industry is faced with economic, cultural and technological challenges. The ecosystem of news has been disrupted. Journalism, as a product for public good, is doubted. The tide is so large and high, recovery requires a new business model, one in which a hybrid of commercial and taxpayers' funds play. Articulating the legal, institutional and policy instruments for the advancement of the public-private hybrid model could be the way forward.”

Huge dilemma here. Recently, the chairperson of the Media Owners Association in Kenya, Stephen Gitagama, went public that journalists must take the lead in figuring out how the independent news media reconfigures its business model and survives the strong waves.

Speaking at the Aga Khan University's Graduate School for Media and Communications in Nairobi on June 22, 2021, Mr Gitagama said; “media freedom must remain supreme regardless of all the challenges that the media industry has been experiencing. We need to have more journalists leading media houses”.

The **third question** speaks to professional excellence. With the democratisation of information, brought about by widespread digital access, it became instructive that journalism must, of necessity, do more than inform merely on events and announcements to stay relevant. In an infodemic world, attention spans have grown a lot shorter and perceptive audiences choosier.

This, naturally, has demanded journalists to exert expertise in their chosen beats. How then, should we train for the industry and what characteristics should define excellence? Our academia are wrestling with this question, if the new programmes is anything to go by. Professional associations, too, must therefore play a more visible role in nudging and driving peer review and performance geared at evolving standards. We, therefore, must seek clever ways to enjoin the academy and the industry, and to encourage journalistic research.

Editorial leadership is critical for this to happen. Even though the place and roles of journalists and the media is under intense scrutiny, editors have always sought

The ideal is self-regulation, even though it has monumental practical difficulties in most of eastern Africa. The coregulatory model, where the State and industry contribute in setting up a regulator – as the Media Council of Kenya – instead has been seen as sufficiently effective with inbuilt checks and balances to ward off overreach by either party.

to provide the information society needs to effectively participate in public life. As gatekeepers, editors have to balance society's needs and those of the media, ensuring that information is palatable, relevant and useful to society, but also ensuring that professional and journalistic integrity is maintained at all times. Despite these important roles editors play, their positions are increasingly under scrutiny, especially from political actors intent on strangling the media space. We need to see the forest, not just the trees, and collaborate where it matters to enable innovation.

The **fourth question** speaks to the need for an enabling legal and policy framework that define a pro-independence regulatory approach. In all the eastern Africa countries, the State has found both subtle and overt ways to seek to influence editorial content. Examples abound from centralised booking of public sector advertisement to direct threats and incarceration.

Many of our countries still have the media being regulated by the State, totally un-recommended. The ideal is self-regulation, even though it has monumental practical difficulties in most of eastern Africa. The coregulatory model, where the State and industry contribute in setting up a regulator – as the Media Council of Kenya – instead has been seen as sufficiently effective with inbuilt checks and balances to ward off overreach by either party. However, given that the media context is always evolving, there is a need for stronger public participation in the regulation and the development of a more robust media criticism.

CPJ's Mumo says governments in the region are also increasingly legislating to curb freedom of speech online: Tanzania's broad and vague Online Content Regulations, not only make it expensive to blog or to run a YouTube channel, they also effectively prohibit critical reporting on a number of subjects, from political demonstrations to natural disasters. In Uganda, CPJ documented how Uganda Communications Commission [selectively deployed⁴](https://cpj.org/2019/02/ugandan-regulator-orders-news-website-suspended-an/) online registration rules in

⁴ <https://cpj.org/2019/02/ugandan-regulator-orders-news-website-suspended-an/>



Sao Paulo, SP / Brazil
- February 12, 2014:
Photojournalists light
candles during a vigil
after a video journalist
get killed while covering
a protest in Rio de
Janeiro.

2019, to target the [Daily Monitor](#)⁵ after reporting that did not sit well with those in power.

She observes a growing trend of Internet restrictions during times of political tension, as recently seen in [Ethiopia](#)⁶, [Uganda](#)⁷, [Tanzania](#)⁸ and [Burundi](#)⁹. Restricting Internet access makes it difficult for journalists to report safely on matters of public interest, and also robs citizens of their rights to access information.

The legislative and regulatory context has been lately skewed in some countries to

5 www.monitor.co.ug

6 <https://cpj.org/2021/05/journalists-shutdowns-myanmar-ethiopia-kashmir/>

7 <https://cpj.org/2021/01/internet-access-cut-social-media-banned-during-uganda-elections/>

8 <https://www.accessnow.org/tanzania-internet-shutdowns-victim-stories/>

9 <https://cpj.org/2020/05/burundi-blocks-social-media-access-during-presiden/>



allow for targeting of journalists who appear independent. Mumo cites the use of restrictive accreditation rules to limit access for both the international and local journalists. Officials recently used accreditation barriers in [Uganda](#)¹⁰ and Tanzania to make it very difficult for the international press to cover elections. Uganda's guidelines on the registration of local journalists further seemed designed to create confusion among the local press, weeks before January's General Election. In Ethiopia, a critical international reporter had his [credentials revoked and was expelled](#)¹¹ from the country in May.

An option is for journalistically-literate voices outside the newsroom to get louder in reviews and criticism both of news media performance and of regulatory actions at all levels. The thinning newsrooms, arising from the exit of experienced journalists, has seen growing availability of hard-nosed journalists in the academia, for example. This lot needs to inject the values of unflinching inquiry and emotion-less delivery to help shore up and grow the profession.

The **fifth question** – probably the most important – is public trust. A dividend of credible reporting, public trust is what gives the media influence and power to push social transformation. Journalism must teach its audiences to expect verified facts, consistently. That verification does not stop with reporting, it must extend to the styles we apply to demonstrate to our audiences that what we are telling them is fact-based, however unpalatable.

The Trust Project¹² tells us that eight factors drive public trust. That we need to demonstrate that the journalist is an expert on what they are reporting on; that the purpose of the story is transparent; that the sources used in the reporting are made available; that the journalist uses local knowledge; that the story delivers diversity through multiple sourcing; that audience feedback is allowed to flow to

10 <https://cpj.org/2020/12/journalists-in-uganda-face-accreditation-hurdles-ahead-of-election-risk-criminal-sanction/>

11 <https://cpj.org/2021/05/cpj-condemns-ethiopias-expulsion-of-new-york-times-reporter-simon-marks/>

12 <https://thetrustproject.org/trusted-journalism/>



the newsroom; that the reporting tactics and methods are transparent; and that the news organisation explains their ownership and standards.

These factors, applied consistently, have been seen to grow public trust. Other principles can come to buttress them. A strong and sustainable media attracts more believability; availability of well-trained and accountable professionals, in a safe work environment, inspires confidence; and a progressive legal framework and a strong supportive structure in society help centralise the public interest.

Seeking to enable and encourage regional solidarity, the Eastern Africa Editors Society (EAES) has worked with other media associations in the region over the last two years to drive discussion on the above issues. The defined goal has been to share experiences and find solutions to existing challenges.

“If these negative trends are not stemmed, we fear that the space for the press in the region will close further. The press and civil society in the region must push back against this creeping repression, including through the courts. We also believe that cross-border solidarity is crucial given that none of these trends are unique to any single East African country,” says Mumo.

The above scenarios do not portend well for the media. Editors, in working to build EAES, seek to find practical, effective and long-lasting solutions to challenges facing journalists in the region, while maintaining solidarity with colleagues suffering political harassment, imprisonment, internment, and fear as a result of their work. The organisation currently has its institutional members in the editor associations in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Churchill Otieno is the President of the Kenya Editors' Guild, which currently chairs the EAES Executive Council. cotieno@gmail.com @OtienoC

Magufuli-era repression still haunts Tanzanian media

Erick Kabendera

Attacks on independent media in Tanzania predated President John Magufuli and many restrictions on freedom of expression remain systematically entrenched in the country's laws after his demise.

In July 2019, I was holed up at my house in a suburb of Tanzania's largest city, Dar es Salaam, with armed men surrounding it. I would later learn that they were State security operators. The siege came days after I had published a story in the regional weekly newspaper, *The EastAfrican*, detailing how Tanzania's fifth president, John Pombe Magufuli, was targeting former senior ruling party officials and cabinet ministers for blackmail. Those facing his wrath apparently contested his autocratic ways. They were threatened with unbailable charges such as money laundering, economic sabotage and espionage.

I frantically called the Bureau Chief in Dar es Salaam to inform him that my house was surrounded. I feared for my life, considering the increasing cases of kidnapping of individuals, some of whom had disappeared without trace. One such vivid case was that of fellow journalist Azory Gwanda, who was taken away by people believed to be security operatives from his home in the coast region and has not been seen since then.

I had reason to be worried. I had survived a late-night assassination attempt four weeks earlier and had lost my two German shephard dogs in a separate daytime attack the previous year. More recently, I had noticed Intelligence operatives trailing me whenever I went out. The sight of armed men outside my house terrified me

Azory was a correspondent for Mwananchi Communications Limited, the publishers of leading daily newspapers, *Mwananchi* and *The Citizen*. At the time of his kidnap, he had been investigating the extra-judicial killings in his home district of Kibiti, which had been rocked by unexplained murders of local government officials and politicians, mostly from the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) political party.

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Sadly, there was no help forthcoming from *The EastAfrican* bureau chief. Instead, a stranger telephoned and told me what to do to avoid being killed. I obeyed his instructions and survived my kidnapping, before I was arrested and charged with cybercrime, sedition, money laundering and economic sabotage. I spent seven months in remand prison over these trumped-up charges.

The arms-at-length attitude exhibited by my bureau chief and *The EastAfrican* newspaper's local parent company, Mwananchi Communications Limited, was likely the result of fear of the government, with which the media firm was negotiating a crucial approval of a shares transfer. The 51 percent shares transfer to a local shareholder was to meet the requirements of the new Media Services Act, which barred majority shareholding in a local publishing company by a foreigner.

President Magufuli had, on different occasions, warned the media about their published content, without referencing any law that was being violated. In March 2017, President Magufuli warned media owners to “watch it” because, while they may think they have the freedom to write, it was not “to that extent”.

In January of the same year, the President issued a warning to two unnamed newspapers, saying their days were numbered. Magufuli's attitude was a carryover of post-independence Tanganyika where the newly established socialist government





The Late Tanzania President, John Pombe Magufuli of CCM on a campaign trail.



When Information minister Nape Nnauye called for Mr Makonda to be disciplined for this outrageous attack on media freedom, he was instead fired from cabinet by President Magufuli. Impunity had been written on the wall.

was the sole voice of the people and anyone who spoke against the state was labelled unpatriotic and an enemy of the people. It is also fair to say that other administrations before Magufuli also exhibited similar tendencies, even if somewhat unpronounced.

Under Magufuli's predecessor, President Jakaya Kikwete, media suppression ranged from the mundane to more serious acts such as torture as was the case with senior editor Absalom Kibanda, who was attacked at night and had his left eye gouged out and one of his fingertips severed in 2013.

Even then, he was relatively lucky. TV journalist Daudi Mwangosi was killed on the spot when a police officer shot him at close range. But despite these cases, Tanzanian media largely remained independent and critical of the government until Magufuli came onto the scene, following his election in October 2015.

Magufuli turned the media landscape upside down with the aim of controlling its narrative. From the day of his verbal warning to media owners, he opened the floodgates of harassment against journalists.

Incidents of media harassment then became more pronounced. One night in March 2017, the powerful Dar es Salaam Regional Commissioner, Paul Makonda, stormed Clouds Media studios, accompanied by six armed men and forced the television station to air a video clip blackmailing maverick evangelical preacher Josephat Gwajima, who was then an outspoken critic of the official and President Magufuli.

When Information minister Nape Nnauye called for Mr Makonda to be disciplined for this outrageous attack on media freedom, he was instead fired from cabinet by President Magufuli¹. Impunity had been written on the wall.

The repression grew and took different forms. Powerful and wealthy media own-

¹ After his sacking, Nnauye called a press conference only for it to be dispersed after an unidentified, ununiformed man drew a gun at him. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20170324-tanzania-sacked-information-minister-held-gunpoint-has-no-regrets-about-being-fired>

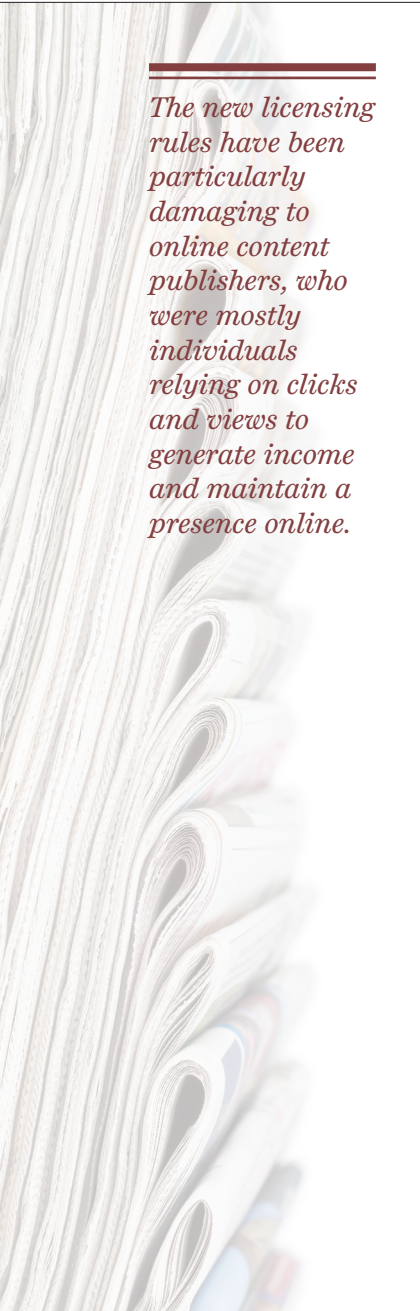
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Former
President
of Tanzania,
Jakaya
Kikwete.

ers such as the late IPP Media conglomerate mogul Reginald Mengi were slapped with huge, backdated tax claims after the new administration struggled to win their allegiance.

New laws that significantly shrunk the civic space were passed, attacks on human rights defenders increased, and media outlets were banned and fined millions of shillings for mistakes that under normal circumstances would have been dealt



The new licensing rules have been particularly damaging to online content publishers, who were mostly individuals relying on clicks and views to generate income and maintain a presence online.

with internally. And media outlets still had to apply for a renewable permit from the state to operate.

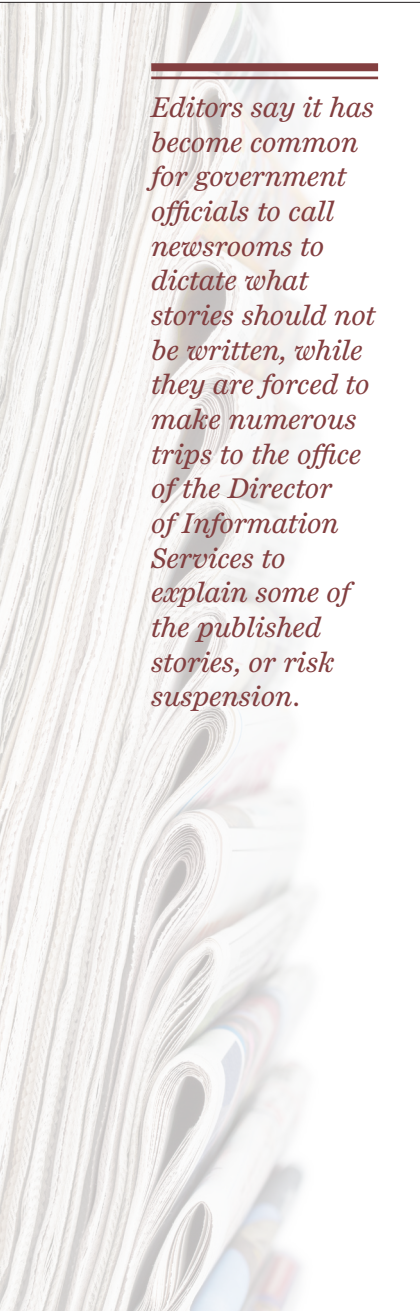
A significant number of news outlets closed and journalists and media houses were driven into serious self-censorship as the laws took effect. Obsessed with how he was portrayed, President Magufuli telephoned television and radio stations to praise kowtowing journalists, who would later be rewarded with jobs in government.

Private media were starved of revenue as the government not only cut down its advertising, but also formed its own advertising conduit, under the Ministry of Information through which all its orders were to be placed for onward transmission to publishers. This was obviously creating a scenario where the state would dangle the carrot to the cash-strapped media companies.

Starving private media of advertising saw a significant reduction in revenue, leading to a loss of newsroom jobs as owners trimmed their operations. Public outlets and CCM's newspaper, *Uhuru*, benefited hugely with government advertising at the expense of private media who were torn between survival and going to bed with the government.

The new licensing rules have been particularly damaging to online content publishers, who were mostly individuals relying on clicks and views to generate income and maintain a presence online. Online media outlets are now required to pay up to \$1,000 (TSh2.2 million) for a licence, on top of having to file various policy documents. These requirements led to the closure of many outlets, too poor to pay the fees or hire extra hands to meet the onerous bureaucratic demands. A few that continued in operation without meeting these regulatory thresholds risked huge fines or arrest and serving time in jail.

Records show that since 2016, at least five newspapers and two radios stations were shut down for between three to 36 months on administrative powers granted to the Director of Information Services, who doubles as the government's spokes-



Editors say it has become common for government officials to call newsrooms to dictate what stories should not be written, while they are forced to make numerous trips to the office of the Director of Information Services to explain some of the published stories, or risk suspension.

person. The director enjoys powers to register and deregister newspapers.

The newspapers so punished included *Raia Mwema*, *Mwanahalisi*, *Mawio*, *Mseto* and *Tanzania Daima*. The radios affected were *Radio 5* and *Magic FM*. In January 2016, the then Information minister Nape Nnauye withdrew the licence of *Mawio* while accusing the newspaper's editors of "endangering national security and public safety". *Mawio* editor Simon Mkina and his *Mwanahalisi* counterpart Idrissa Jabil are still facing "sedition" charges in court. *Mawio*'s owners went to court and successfully challenged the decision to de-register the title, but the government is yet to reinstate its licence. In an extreme case of self-censorship, *Nipashe* suspended itself for one month after publishing a story it feared would infuriate the government.

Editors say it has become common for government officials to call newsrooms to dictate what stories should not be written, while they are forced to make numerous trips to the office of the Director of Information Services to explain some of the published stories, or risk suspension. Journalists fear government spies/collaborators have infiltrated their newsrooms and were blamed for the suspension, in February 2018, of four top editors by Mwananchi Communications Limited, following State House claims that they had been bribed to take a hard stance against the government. Journalists are now frequently and arbitrarily arrested by the police for covering demonstrations, or because of their critical reporting.

Upon my arrest, some editors were scared to speak out, visit me in prison or even associate with my friends for fear of retribution from the government.

Under Magufuli, new laws have been formulated to further constrict the media space. The Media Services Act, which came into effect in November 2016 to replace the Newspaper Act of 1976, is one example. The Media Services Act concentrates power in the hands of the government. It gives power to the minister of Information to license print media annually and is able to prohibit importation of publications, contrary to the public interest, and order private media houses to report on issues "of national importance". The law does not define "public interest"



The online regulations have been criticised as further restricting freedom of expression, citizens' right to privacy and the work of whistle-blowers and investigative journalists.

or “national importance”, leaving wide room for interpretation by the government.

The new law establishes the Journalists Accreditation Board, which must approve all practising journalists in Tanzania. Besides, the Media Council of Tanzania, which currently acts to uphold professional standards, and the new board, while passing as independent, will have their members appointed by, and are accountable to, the minister of Information.

Under the Media Services Act, the Director of Information Services now chairs what is called the “Central Government Advertising Agency”, which is responsible for collecting and distributing all public advertising to preferred outlets.

In March 2018, The Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations were introduced and it became clear the government was keen to extend its grip on media to online content producers, who are now required to apply for a licence and pay a fee of up to \$900, an amount that is higher than the country's per capita income. Besides, the online players are first required to open companies before seeking registration, an extra cost.

The Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations also give a quasi-independent government body, the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority, the power to revoke a permit if a site publishes content that “causes annoyance” or leads to “public disorder”, without providing any right to appeal or request judicial review of takedown orders. Anonymous use of the Internet is now essentially prohibited as well. Failure to comply with the regulations may lead to heavy fines and to imprisonment for a minimum period of 12 months.

The online regulations have been criticised as further restricting freedom of expression, citizens' right to privacy and the work of whistle-blowers and investigative journalists. It is important to note that after the regulations came into force, several blogs and popular social media platforms like JamiiForums were hindered in their work as they failed to register according to the new rules. (Some of the sites were later reinstated without giving reasons).



The changes that came in the 1990s, including the opening up space for political expression and private investment in the media sector, were, to a great extent, due to aid conditions imposed by international money lending institutions such as the International Monetary Fund.

In September 2017, five people were charged under the Electronic and Postal Communications Act for sharing critical remarks about President Magufuli and the country's police, made on social media. In December, a co-founder of JamiiForums, Maxence Melo, faced charges under the Cybercrimes Act for refusing to share the forum's user data and for operating a website that is not registered in Tanzania.

Along with the Cybercrimes Act that was passed in 2015, under the Statistics Act 2018, journalists face draconian fines and lengthy prison terms for publishing 'false or misleading information' as part of a clear plot to silence any efforts to hold the government to account by the public and instruments that champion public interest like the media and the wider civil society.

It is no wonder then that Tanzania authorities' disdain for press freedom and the freedom of expression exacerbated by Magufuli's dictatorial tendency raised concerns, not only in the country, but also abroad.

When Tanzania was a socialist state, up to the mid-1980s, the government directed control of the press. Adopting a developmental approach to journalism, the government viewed the role of the media as assisting it in communicating its agenda to the public. In this environment, critical reporting did not flourish and as a result, only State-owned media outlets were dominant.

The changes that came in the 1990s, including the opening up space for political expression and private investment in the media sector, were, to a great extent, due to aid conditions imposed by international money lending institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. However, to-date, the government has not abandoned the socialist-era notion that the right to access and share information must be subjugated to greater concerns of a growing democracy, such as security and development. This duality is reflected in the media legal environment where the state gives a right with one hand and then takes it away with another.

Post-script: President Samia Hassan Suluhu, who replaced the late Magufuli, has



signalled her intentions to roll back at least some of the repressive edicts signed off by the former leader by calling for the reinstatement of banned media outlets on condition that they followed the law once back in operation².

But undoing more than a decade of media repression in Tanzania will require deeper reforms to expand the country's civic space and entrench a genuinely democratic political culture.

In mid-July 2021, Freeman Mbowe, the head of the country's main opposition party, Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (Chadema) was arrested along with 10 other party members in the port city of Mwanza, on allegations of breaking Covid-19 social-distancing rules forbidding "unnecessary gatherings".

However, he was then accused, without evidence, of funding unspecified terror activities designed to assassinate government leaders, leading many to conclude that the charges were politically motivated, and a continuation of the Magufuli-era methods under the new administration.

As a victim of trumped-up charges myself, this is all too familiar and a reminder of how deep Tanzania must reform to return to the path of the rule of law, constitutional democracy, and free and independent media.

² See <https://www.theafricareport.com/78539/tanzania-cautious-optimism-as-president-suluhu-hassan-signals-new-policies/> Last accessed July 28, 2021.

Duty, decisions and dares: Journalism during a pandemic in Kenya

Verah Okeyo

Reporting about the coronavirus pandemic from the frontline exposes some home truths about newsroom readiness to change what it considers important and how to cover it.

As a health reporter in Kenya, my beat was often more about explaining public health messages to Kenyans: Explain this to me like a two-year-old type of situations. The need for health reporters in Kenyan newsrooms rises during pestilences, industrial strikes that affect the health system, or anything with a massive body count.

Then Kenya recorded the first case of Covid-19 in March 2020, and my role changed abruptly. Suddenly, my colleagues and I at the Nation Media Group and other media houses added other duties to our job descriptions, which included explaining the science in a tumultuous uncertain time.

After a year of reporting about the pandemic and the health system, I concluded



that Kenya has one of the most resilient journalism systems in the continent, and it can produce media products that compete with some of the best in the world. However, due to structural and management issues, it would take a much longer time to realise this dream.

Until the pandemic hit us hard, I had always muttered why politics still has this sacred position in newsrooms. Well, politics and sports bring in money from advertisers and circulation. Basically, politics and sports pay the bills, while science is just for prestige. This is the greatest lie that has impoverished journalism.

Politics and sports reigned supreme when journalists were the only source of information. It was also true when the consumption of news in a Kenyan homes was patriarchal: When there was a television set, daddy or the husband controlled the remote, and so everyone got to watch sports or politics. It certainly does not help that most people in decision-making positions in media houses in Kenya are men.

Tragic miscalculation

This perception has condemned specialised beats such as health, science, and environment to underfunding, and this was exposed as a tragic miscalculation for



Police round-up people during curfew hours. Some journalists were assaulted as well.

newsrooms in Kenya during the pandemic. As the story evolved, journalists conditioned to report on health only during outbreaks, did more of counting; how many people are infected today, how many have died...

After a few days, the public was fed up with “Kenya has recorded 20 more cases of Covid-19, the Ministry of Health has reported”, and began to express their dissatisfaction.

The few health reporters and editors in newsrooms were overworked, some to the brink of a mental break down. In a February 2021 [blog](#), curated by the African Women in Media (AWIM), Eunice Omollo, a health reporter from NTV, described how she became suicidal from reporting about the pandemic. When reporters started dropping dead from Covid-19, the anxiety tripled.

The financial situation worsened it for many journalists. Journalism in Kenya is, generally, challenging and does not attract the best in the field, as veteran journalist Otula Owuor has [noted](#). The pay for entry-level graduate reporters in many media houses is as low as KSh40,000 (\$400) per month. Some correspondents—a term that would mean a highly paid and respected reporter in international media, but not in Kenya or many African countries for that matter—are on zero-hour contracts and are only paid per published article.

With lockdowns, these reporters did not go to the field, and so there was little content to publish and make money. Nearly all media houses [cut salaries](#), and some even laid off reporters to cope with the financial implications of the pandemic.

These challenges affected productivity and the quality of content immensely. Overworked and anxious, health reporters had little time to research, or diversify sources. With the usual regimentation, they reached out to officials who were—obviously—gagged as the government sought to control the flow of information. Those that spoke to reporters, were too scared to remove their heads from the sand, in case they said something that upset officialdom.

At the Nation, we put effort into including the voices in the community through



The success of our Maverick Insider membership programme had already helped us grow our organisation over the past two years. Apart from the financial benefits of a growing membership base, we had began engaging with members in ways that began deepening our relationship with them.

collaborating with our colleagues from the bureaus. However, with military deadlines, it would be too much to ask of the same reporter to go into the community to talk to people. So, to catch up with the work, media houses put their star political reporters on the science and health beat, which is generally not a subject that reporters step into and just “wing it”. Expectedly, the habitual press bashing came in harsh. Kenyans on Twitter, scientists and the public corrected the reporters on basic public health concepts that those not experienced in that beat got wrong.

“Cursed blessing”

Yet, this right here— a pandemic with a story that is constantly evolving in very difficult times— was what Kenya’s media houses should have taken advantage of to make a killing. The world was looking for information to help people make life-altering decisions for themselves and their families, such as where to take children to school, when to travel and what to do with money available. With uncertainty and lockdowns, Kenyans remained glued to their screens to know the latest progress of tests, availability of vaccines, where to seek health care, among other things. No one was better placed to offer these answers than journalists.

Other newsrooms saw the pandemic as a “cursed blessing”: while it led to financial turmoil for media houses globally, causing some to close permanently, it was an opportunity to change how journalists run their organisations. This almost sounds psychopathic until you hear what the editor in chief of the American magazine, *The Atlantic*, Jeffrey Goldberg said.

In April 2020, the Nieman Lab [published](#) portions of an email that he sent to his staff which read: “We have never, in the 163-year history of this magazine, had an audience like we had in March: 87 million unique visitors to our site, and more than 168 million page views. The number of unique visitors is astonishing — more than double the previous one-month record”.

Ed Young, a science reporter at the *Atlantic*, who wrote 2,000-to-4,000-word articles explaining the complex science of the virus, is credited for having played a big

As with all businesses, we had some serious thinking to do about whether our strategies would hold in the face of the pandemic. But with both journalism and food retailers being deemed essential services, we knew that even in a lockdown, we would still be able to print and distribute a product. Advertiser support would be the great unknown, and April saw a 70 percent drop in print advertising in South Africa.

role in the growth of these numbers. Mr [Young even won a Pulitzer](#) this year for his coverage of the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the *Atlantic* made its Covid-19 coverage available on open access, but the paper focused on the long-term goal where quality, and not beating deadlines, was supreme. It paid off, because audiences engaged with this high-quality content and, when the time came for a paywall and the need to subscribe, many had no problem paying. This came from trust. The trust that the public has that reporters will give their all to inform the public beyond the declarations of health officials and the governments they serve. The Covid-19 pandemic proved that journalism is a public service good, just like medicine, and one that media houses, in Kenya and elsewhere in the region missed an opportunity to treat as such.

MERSH- it

As I covered the pandemic, I thought it was not just enough to improve efficiency, say like buying technology for podcasts. It is much more than branding, and a change of the look of the paper. It is letting go of the bureaucracies that have stopped media houses from restructuring their businesses in a profound way and doing so when that risk can earn them more money and allies. As Prof Charlie Beckett writes in his book; *Help! Help! Who Will Save Us?, The New Media Landscape*, “It is about a revolution in the way that one of the planet’s most important cultural and economic forces is going to operate”.

The first step in this direction would have been to diversify the content and change the way it is produced and presented to audiences. At the beginning of the pandemic, the number of those infected or dead seemed important, and we reported them. Several months into the pandemic, most of the population had already accepted the reality that there was a pandemic around them and that it could kill certain groups of people who are immunocompromised.

As science trickled in, reporters specialised in science journalism shifted their focus to what doctors in Covid-19 centres were saying about treatment options, nu-



trition, and home-based care. They read acres of complex scientific journals, held boring but important conversations with experts to answer difficult questions for and from the public.

As parts of the world begin to reopen, and now that the coronavirus disease is going to be with us for a long time, the media now must help people rebuild their lives and construct a post-pandemic world. While politics has a sacred place in the media, newsrooms must create space for and invest in journalism about Science, Medicine, Education, Religion, “and all that Shit”; or SMERSH as the *Washington Post*’s former managing editor, Howard Simons, christened it.

The change that is needed to diversify content should be so revolutionary that it will remove the scepticism among publishers and producers that “non-politics” is not lucrative enough. Beats such as gender, young people, science and education are often hidden in some corner, or pullout in the newspapers, or lined up outside prime time on television. The change that is needed is one that would introduce roles that were not considered mainstream enough — such as an Instagram editor; the [Washington Post](#) has one — and place well-paid and credible journalists on them, so that these roles are part and parcel of production of news. This comes in handy, given the audiences that we are dealing with now.

Augmented by innovation

The [2020 Digital News Report](#) [PDF] from the Reuters Institute of Journalism reported that “more than two-thirds (69%) of people now use the smartphone for news weekly and, as we’ve seen, these devices are encouraging the growth of shorter video content via third-party platforms, as well as audio content like podcasts”

In Kenya, the report showed, the number is as high as 83 percent. This shows women and men, of various age groups, are seeking information about what serves them, and delivered to them in a manner that they like.

Thankfully, the pandemic showed media houses about the diversity in consumption and that old school boots-on-the-ground reporting will need to be augmented



by innovation. As we reported about the pandemic, Mutuma Mathiu, the Nation Media Group's editorial director, noticed that young people were left out in the pieces produced. One day, he passed by my desk and expressed his concern over young people's suicides, and how journalism portrayed this as some defiance and rebellion.

In my new role as the editor for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Mutuma tasked me to find ways in which the voices and concerns of young people could be included in the paper. What is most notable in the Nation [appointments](#) that came with mine, were new editing roles in audience engagement, community, enterprise and growth. These were not only accomplished journalists, but were expected to see news as a cultural commodity as well, not only for the traditional role of advancing democracy.

Innovation was also needed to look for funding from individuals and institutions willing to invest in journalism. While the media appreciates that advertising revenue has fallen, and that money is going to come from other sources, many media executives continue to cling to advertising as the main underlying business model.

The two leading traditional media houses in Kenya, the Nation Media Group and the Standard Group, now have paywalls around some of their online content, but it will take a while before these begin to bring in enough money to run the businesses. It is worth noting that the [New York Times started charging](#) for its online



content in 2011, but it was only in 2020 that the digital earnings surpassed those from print.

Grants provide another model, but require some careful navigation. Organisations such as the National Geographic, Google News Initiative and Pulitzer Centre for Crisis Reporting, set aside money to help newsrooms cope with the devastating effects of the pandemic. Funding organisations such as the Gates Foundation also chipped in, but the big fish such as the Gates contribute less than three percent of their money to media development.

This is understandable because news production is not their core business. Also, producing news is not as expensive as, say, developing a vaccine. The money that a media house would consider substantial, would be very little when compared to a scientific endeavour.

Even when this little money is given, it is often to non-profit newsrooms. The Nation's Science Desk receives funding from the Gates Foundation, but it is unlikely that the same organisation would give that level of funding to more than one newsroom in Kenya. Smaller newsrooms would do well to explore smaller or medium-sized grants that range from \$5,000 to as much as \$500,000 for projects that can run for a month to a year.

Kenya's main media houses encountered three challenges in this area. First, most did not apply when the opportunities were open. Then those that did often presented low-quality applications. Finally, some that received such funding, managed it poorly.

Applying and successfully implementing a grant is an art requiring business, journalism, and project-management skills. Newsrooms are well advised to develop these skills while also developing policies to ensure that this funding does not undermine editorial independence.

It will take a while to recover from the onslaught of the pandemic in the newsrooms in Kenya, but media managers and journalists should not waste this crisis.

From online to print: How South Africa's Daily Maverick is swimming against the tide

Styli Charalambous

As many legacy media houses rush to retool their business models to make money off content online, one outfit has done the opposite. The Daily Maverick was founded in 2009 as an online newspaper. Then in August 2020, smack in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, the outfit announced a printed weekly version. Almost a year later, print circulation is up to 34,000 copies and at the end of July, the Daily Maverick will impose a full cover, price which was previously subsidised by a retail outlet. What can we learn from it?

The media world did more than lift an eyebrow when, after many publications announced they were cutting their print editions, the *Daily Maverick* announced it was launching a weekly newspaper. As a digital-only, investigative and long-form news outlet based in South Africa, we have made a habit of contrarian moves in the decade of our existence. But was this initiative as crazy as some would believe?

It wasn't crazy for us at all – thanks to product thinking, a discipline we have developed over the years.



We've never been short of grand ideas or a willingness to experiment. We know the terms "fail fast" and "fail often," the mantra of technology entrepreneurs. But the part of "fail fast and often" that fails to make the headlines is that without a system to hypothesise, monitor and measure the outcome of your experiments, you'll miss the target. I think that's what happened to us for much of our first eight years.

Not everything we tried failed, mind you. We have produced some great journalism, won international awards and created a membership programme, *Maverick Insiders*, that's been showcased as an example for others. We've doubled our newsroom size in the past two years.

The *Daily Maverick* offers a wide variety of benefits to its members. Its membership programme was used as a case study for *membershipguide.org*, produced by the Membership Puzzle Project.

The foundation of everything we do is the bedrock of quality long-form journalism and newsletters. But with slow progress on developing revenue, we had to experiment with a small budget. In a way, that helped us avoid chasing after all the "bright shiny things" that were supposed to save journalism. Our experiments were always lean. But eventually, we suffered under the



weight of projects that were started with gut instinct and little research, and no pre-defined measures of success, project plans or roadmaps. We were like those naturally gifted athletes who got to the big leagues and found that talent can only get you so far.

How we decide on new products

The Japanese concept of *Ikigai* -- often applied to people seeking the right career path -- inspired the *Daily Maverick's* approach to business strategy.

In a media world of limited budgets, talent and resources, choosing which new projects to pursue is critical. The Japanese concept of *Ikigai* has been useful in helping us determine which ones fall into our sweet spot for consideration.

Ikigai has been used to help people figure out what work they should pursue to achieve happiness in their personal lives. Adjusting *Ikigai* slightly for an organisation, we should be pursuing projects that: we are passionate about; we are good at; the world needs, and can be funded

While this might seem to be common sense, that is why it's effective. Do your new projects hit the sweet spot of the Venn diagram? Companies that have institutionalised an innovation culture have developed scorecards of how to assess new opportunities. If your organisation doesn't have this yet, we have found that *Ikigai* can help guide your efforts.

Product thinking is a methodology that sits at the intersection of journalism, business, data and technology and the user experience. Stacie-Marie Ishmael, head of product at the *Texas Tribune*, defines it as a "a framework for identifying, defining, and approaching business-critical opportunities." This lens reminds us that product development is a mindset and a practice.

Why a newspaper? And why now?

It can be easy to get swept up in the negative outlook about the news industry. To assume that hopelessness applies equally to all. But if the last decade has taught



us anything, it's how to make survival look palatable. For a while, things got pretty dark – fighting for economic survival, while battling a corrupt government. But through it all, we were spurred on by the growth of our audience and the reputation of the brand.

Our venture into digital-only publishing came at a crazy time. Focusing on politics, in the era of Google and Facebook in a country whose major organs of the State had been captured by nefarious influences seeking to loot national and provincial



budgets, wasn't an environment conducive to innovation. But we always had the suspicion that our brand of long-form analysis and investigations would do well in printed form. Over the years, we reached out to existing print publishers with offers of collaboration that never went anywhere.

In the end, we decided to take control of our print ambitions ourselves. After the launch of our successful membership programme, aided by philanthropic support, we were able to double the size of our newsroom in 24 months. Now we felt it was time to try to move ahead with a print product.

Start with feelings. End with facts.

Most new product decisions start with a gut feeling that this could be a worthwhile idea – a pursuit that is worthy of our scarce resources. That was where the idea started for a weekly print edition. But what did the research say, before we bet a lot of money on something that so many other companies were abandoning? While industry data on circulation and advertising showed that the print business was declining eight to 10 percent per year, there were some anomalies that we needed to adjust for.

Leading South African newspapers had suffered a string of embarrassing reports caused by incompetence and political influence. Readers had responded by abandoning print.

Firstly, while paid-for titles in South Africa had shown a drop in circulation of around 50 percent in the last 5 years, free-distribution publications remained strong. Another bit of data that surprised us was the results of a large digital consumer research panel that we participate in every year. This survey of 30,000 respondents showed that 82 percent of our readers, and those who follow the biggest news website in the country, still regularly read a newspaper. But 34 percent don't pay for it. A separate reader survey found that the main reason people stopped reading print editions was a loss of quality and trust in those publications. Of course, digital media had sped up this process, but we concluded that there



was still demand for a quality print edition. Armed with this data, we began to think we could find an audience for a quality weekly title, produced by experienced journalists and for free.

Understanding our users

New print publications our team had been involved in before would have taken shape with little reader research or consultation, and a big push to launch with the perfect version after many delays and blown budgets. This time around, we focused on the “job to be done” for readers, based on their various information needs.

What would this newspaper seek to do for readers, and how would that inform the many product decisions to be made? What would a weekly print offering by a digital-first publisher look like, and how would it serve our readers given what we know about their online reading habits? How do we inform, educate, inspire and offer diversion in a curated weekly information service delivered in print? These were the jobs the print edition needed to do.

DAILY MAVERICK

It's a classic Zuma numbers problem: there's an inconsistency of something like eleveny million in the amount he owes the state attorney, who paid his legal fees for at least a decade. By Des Erasmus

DEFEND TRUTH
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Mr Zuma and the Deceased Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) were involved in a legal case, the South African court says. The case was about the DPP's role in the investigation of the late President Jacob Zuma's alleged involvement in the 2009-2010 South African general election. The court found that the DPP had acted in a biased manner and that the investigation was flawed. The court also found that the DPP had acted in a manner that was inconsistent with the public interest. The court's decision was a landmark one, as it was the first time that a high court had ruled against the DPP. The court's decision was a landmark one, as it was the first time that a high court had ruled against the DPP. The court's decision was a landmark one, as it was the first time that a high court had ruled against the DPP.

LEARNING IN A PANDEMIC. FINDING SUCCESS.

When COVID-19 struck, our students were struggling. Our experts met and began to find ways to help. We created a new course, "Learning in a Pandemic: Finding Success". This course is designed to help students find ways to succeed in a world that has changed. It covers topics like remote learning, time management, and staying motivated. The course is available for free on our website. Visit www.dailymaverick.co.za/covid-19 to learn more.

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For starters, the content mix had to take into account the weekly nature of the product, incorporating both the biggest stories of the week past as well as new, previously unpublished investigations. This would mean reorganising our editorial efforts to align the timing of publishing online and in the newspaper. For readers, this newspaper would be about reigniting the lost ritual of the weekend read, something that came up strongly in our one-on-one discussions with our team and readers.

The decline in quality and trust of other newspapers had killed the deep reading experience that many people had come to associate Sundays with. By offering a product worthy of their time, we could rekindle those experiences, missed even more at a time when our attention is being constantly raided by notifications on tiny screens. The job it needed to do was give people a reason to take a break from the digital deluge with enough quality journalism to create new weekend rituals.

A collaborative partnership

We decided to call our newspaper the *Daily Maverick 168* (a reference to the number of hours in a week). We wanted it to be free. In a country with 30 percent unemployment and 40 percent poverty, the *Daily Maverick* does not operate a pay-wall on its website. Instead, we have a voluntary membership programme through which we encourage people to join our community of committed readers to help us “Defend Truth” in a country plagued by corruption. So we have kept our work free for those who might not be able to afford it.

We wanted to extend this thinking to print. Our printers suggested we take inspiration from the Pick n Pay Supermarket group, which published the largest circulation magazine in the country by offering it free to their loyalty cardholders, but with a cover price of 30 Rand (about \$2) for others. With 8 million registered cardholders, the company’s Smart Shopper loyalty programme is the biggest and most advanced in the country.

As sponsors of our food newsletter, Pick n Pay was already a commercial partner



The success of our Maverick Insider membership programme had already helped us grow our organisation over the past two years. Apart from the financial benefits of a growing membership base, we had begun engaging with members in ways that began deepening our relationship with them.

of ours. We began a series of discussions that led us to offer the product free to loyalty programme members, and to incorporate shopper behaviour data into our product decisions.

Initially, our intention was to take on the market-leading *Sunday Times* head-on with Sunday distribution, but we changed to Saturday once we found out that this was the top day for foot traffic in the supermarkets. Once we had agreed on terms to offer the print newspaper free to Pick n Pay Smart Shoppers, the company let us use their audience data to help us market the paper and provide audience insights and sales data. Distributing on Saturdays also meant that we could reach cities far away from our printers before the weekend was up. It also meant our team wouldn't have to work on Saturdays, which was also a plus.

Testing our ideas: A member survey and a pilot project

The *Daily Maverick* asked its website readers for input on where its print edition should be distributed. The success of our Maverick Insider membership programme had already helped us grow our organisation over the past two years. Apart from the financial benefits of a growing membership base, we had begun engaging with members in ways that began deepening our relationship with them. We found volunteers willing to provide their expertise, and we held feedback sessions, embracing a more collaborative relationship with our members. By the time of the newspaper launch, we were “engagement fit”. We asked prospective readers which Pick n Pay stores they wanted included at launch. We got more than 10,000 votes in two weeks, enabling us to gauge reader demand and plan the number of copies distributed to stores.

The survey also enabled us to capture email addresses of prospective readers whom we could invite to participate in surveys and notify of product announcements. By the time the pilot weekend came around, we could select 20 stores, in two cities, and test demand based on a combination of reader votes, past newspaper sales data from Pick n Pay and some wildcard elements. Once the pilot was concluded,

As with all businesses, we had some serious thinking to do about whether our strategies would hold in the face of the pandemic. But with both journalism and food retailers being deemed essential services, we knew that even in a lockdown, we would still be able to print and distribute a product. Advertiser support would be the great unknown, and April saw a 70 percent drop in print advertising in South Africa.

we had sales data per store to determine which ones had leftover copies. A post-pilot reader survey and sales data from Pick n Pay helped us debrief the pilot effort with some important findings:

- 72 percent of copies were distributed, almost all to loyalty cardholders
- Some stores sold out by midday
- 80 percent of readers had made a special trip to the store to get the paper
- In some pilot stores, people walked out with eight times as many copies of our print edition as other papers available there
- We achieved an average 8/10 net promoter score

Once again, all this data helped us validate our hypothesis that a free, quality newspaper could be successful and would help us plan the stores to select for launch and the volumes to allocate per store.

OKRs: Starting with the end in mind

Since October 2019, we'd began incorporating the use of OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) as a project management framework. Starting with the membership team, OKRs have been encouraged when planning and managing projects and teams. With the newspaper project, OKRs were set in January and re-evaluated when lockdown due to Covid-19 forced delays.

As with all businesses, we had some serious thinking to do about whether our strategies would hold in the face of the pandemic. But with both journalism and food retailers being deemed essential services, we knew that even in a lockdown, we would still be able to print and distribute a product. Advertiser support would be the great unknown, and April saw a 70 percent drop in print advertising in South Africa.

Our response was to push back our pilot date by 3 months and use the time to deal with the new demands of the pandemic and work on our designs. All the other



goals using the OKR framework remained the same and helped us stay focused. Our objective was to launch the best newspaper in the country, with key results that we could measure: circulation, net promoter scores, awards and attention from other media.

The launch - and our conclusions

Our new print newspaper shows how a news organisation can innovate by using practices that have been commonplace in other industries. Marketing, product and technology are functional areas that are critically important to designing more audience-centric news businesses. Core to that is designing products with a human focus and driven by the needs of the ultimate consumers of those products.

These practices move us away from how products were designed and launched in the past. We need to test assumptions, use data to drive decisions and iterate in increments to keep improving our products. These concepts, while born in technology companies creating digital products, can even be used to launch a print newspaper.

Note: *This article was first published by the Knight Journalism Lab in November 2020. It has been slightly updated and is reproduced with permission from the author.*

A brave new world, and the newsroom of the future

Christine Mungai

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted workflows in many industries. How will journalism – and the centralised newsroom that has always been at its heart – be changed by it? Here is one view from the outside where start-ups like the Baraza Media and The Continent are doing things differently.

When I joined the newsroom in November 2010, it was already past its glorious days, I was told. Apparently, I had missed the “real” newsroom vibes: whiskey in drawers and unrestricted chain smoking; editors tearing your (physical) copy to shreds and tossing it into the bin as you watched; boisterous all-nighters putting the paper to bed at 4am, instead of a reasonable 6pm, the previous day.

In the years before I joined, the Human Resource department became more serious in putting “structures” in place. People had to clean up and act more professional, we were told. Then the newspaper production became digital, denying editors the pleasure of throwing bad copy in a reporter’s face, or red pen in hand, the drama of bleeding over poor copy. Many a mid-level editor had major gripes about this in particular, having been hazed in this way (it’s called “building character”, they said), and now not having the opportunity to do the same to some hapless



New Standard Group's, newsroom layout.





soul coming in through the door for the first time.

Quietly, though, I was also told that the newsroom was now less chaotic and somewhat safer, especially for young women; evidently putting the paper to bed sober at 6pm as opposed to drunk at 4am makes a major difference to women's safety. We, the "millennials" (this was always said with an unmistakably contemptuous tone) were having it good, being protected from much – but not all – of the standard workplace bullying and generalised chaos that comes with the newsroom territory. But we were also having it bad, missing out on the camaraderie and unspecified vibes that were the real thing.

I'm being a bit facetious, of course. But just a little bit. The past few years have been a time of great upheaval, not just because of the digital revolution's impact on traditional business models, but also on newsroom culture, structures and processes. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic, which blew everything out of the water. Newsrooms have had to dramatically restructure their workflows, and have been forced to allow things they said they'd never do – I remember many of my millennial peers fighting mightily to be allowed to attend the morning meeting and then file their story from wherever they were, and being told it was "unprofessional" to do so. The professional thing, apparently, was to be seen typing at your office desk, with increasing vigour, the closer your editor got.

Now, news organisations are starting to reconsider whether a physical newsroom is even necessary. My beloved '*alma mater*', *The EastAfrican*, has had a fully remote team since the pandemic hit in March 2020; the majority of other newspapers in the region have some kind of remote/in-person hybrid working model. It is more difficult for television and radio outlets to go fully remote because of the specialised studio equipment for some types of shows, but even so, stories designed to be watched on YouTube and listened-to in podcast apps are not tethered to the studio in the same way.

Still, there are drawbacks to remote newsrooms – Zoom fatigue and annoying tech glitches, for example: there’s only so many times you can believably say, “Sorry, you’re breaking up,” before people start to catch on that you’re not really paying attention.

In fact, Covid-19 triggered, but also accelerated, these trends that were already shaping up – going remote has been both a response to the pandemic and also to the financial crises that many newsrooms were already facing from lost advertising revenue in the digital age; having your staff working from home also results in cutting many overhead costs of maintaining a physical office.

As [several TikTok trends](#)¹ have persuasively argued, most employees would much rather the flexibility of working from home with occasional hours at the office, rather than the other way around, as was the standard in the ‘Before Times’. The Quartz newsroom in New York [found](#)² that the majority of its employees were happy to consider coming back to the office after a year of being fully remote, but only if they came in for two or three days a week at the most – Wednesdays and Thursdays were the most popular days to come into the office. None (as in, 0%) planned to use the office again full-time in the future. I would expect similar responses in a newsroom anywhere in East Africa, the pandemic having given us sweet relief from brutal commutes, among others.

Still, there are drawbacks to remote newsrooms – Zoom fatigue and annoying tech glitches, for example: there’s only so many times you can believably say, “Sorry, you’re breaking up,” before people start to catch on that you’re not really paying attention. And even with my slightly exaggerated derision of newsroom “vibes” at the beginning of this article, I have to concede that there is value in unstructured, unmediated workplace chatting and gossip, for journalists especially – many a great story has been seeded as folks stand around the tea flask at 2pm. It is much easier to brainstorm and work collaboratively in-person than it is remotely, that *je ne sais quoi* is difficult to recreate with a decentralised team.

The changing newsroom is one thing, but some organisations are pushing the

¹ https://www.tiktok.com/@loewhaley/video/6961460351556668677?sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6985115015981139458&is_from_webapp=v1&is_copy_url=0 Last accessed July 14, 2021.

² <https://qz.com/work/2028053/11-important-lessons-about-managing-a-hybrid-workplace/> Last accessed July 14, 2021.



Forgoing a website altogether is remarkable in an industry that is still grappling with how to thrive in a saturated digital ecosystem, and for most, this has meant tunnel-vision into a million iterations of websites, new and revamped websites, paywalls, and middling success on social media.

envelope even further by reconsidering their approach to publishing in the digital age. *The Continent* is one such publication, a pan-African weekly, started by a group of journalists with non-profit organisation Ademela Trust in South Africa. Fully distributed on WhatsApp, the publication has no website and no stories online. The stories are intuitively designed to be read on a mobile screen, mostly short news pieces of 250-400 words, and a few longer pieces of about 900 words.

“We’re not publishing on a website because we don’t need to,” co-founder and editorial director Siphon Kings told me in an interview. “The format we have works, and we are just focused on being where readers are. For us, that means being on WhatsApp.” Kings and his co-founder Simon Allison lead a core team of nine, all working remotely, and have published contributions from over 200 journalists, writers, photographers and illustrators from across Africa in the past year.

Forgoing a website altogether is remarkable in an industry that is still grappling with how to thrive in a saturated digital ecosystem, and for most, this has meant tunnel-vision into a million iterations of websites, new and revamped websites, paywalls, and middling success on social media. *The Continent* is avoiding that digital wasteland entirely, and is forging its own path, funded by a number of grants including from Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, the National Endowment for Democracy and Africa No Filter. As for advertising, the publication is being cautious. They published one advert last year “as an experiment”, and they are categorical that future advertising must match the quality of their work and the journalism they create – they won’t accept advertising from fossil fuel companies or arms dealers, for example.

It seems to be paying off. After just over a year of existence, *The Continent* has over 11,000 subscribers a week, who receive the publication for free. Subscribers are asked to share the publication on their own WhatsApp networks – “not indiscriminately, but only with people who might appreciate it”. An audience survey towards the end of 2020 showed that each subscriber shares the publication with about seven other people, though there are ‘super-sharers’ who do so with over 20 other



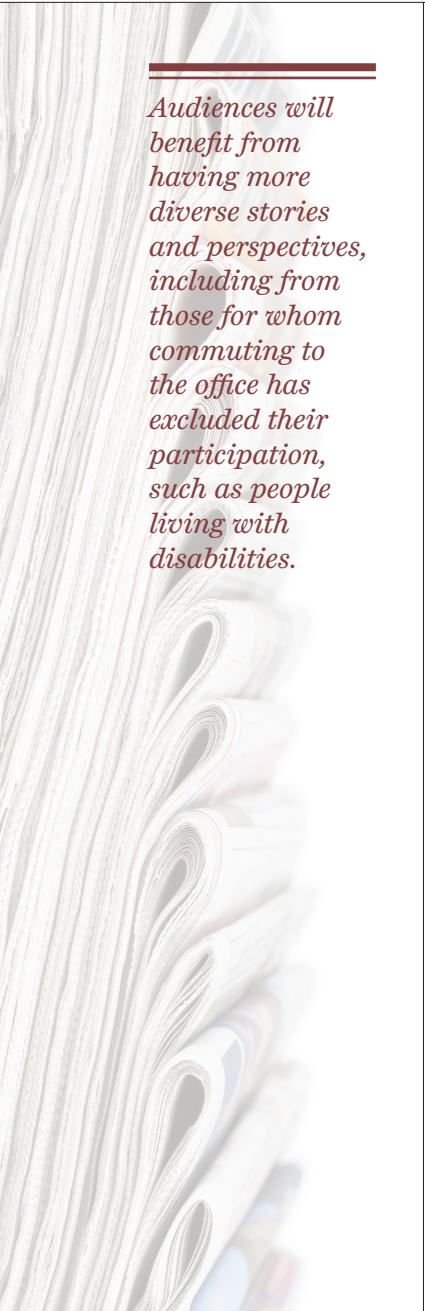


people. All told, *The Continent* could be looking at a circulation of over 100,000 in just one year.

The Continent is just one example of an organisation that is working to figure its own way in a context of precarious employment and shaky business models. That precarity and instability, perhaps unfortunately, is the reality of the news media today, and all we've ever known as millennials. And it's not only a problem in newsrooms: the 'gig economy' has pervaded the labour market in substantive ways, where unstable, unpredictable, and frequently low-wage work is less the exception and more the norm.

In this kind of environment, forging your own non-traditional path is sometimes the only reasonable response. A few years ago, folks started referring to places of work as "spaces", which again, was met with derision, but I think there's to be said when place becomes space – ethereal and unbounded rather than concrete and well-defined. The organisation I work for as curator, Baraza Media Lab, for me exists in that way as a space rather than a place, the consequence of having all the possibilities of the digital age but at the same time, deep structural dysfunction and precarious employment as a media professional.

In that context, one has to make peace with the limitations and then create alternative spaces off the beaten track, where a different kind of narrative is possible. One may not rise through the ranks of a respected media house and become the next Joseph Odindo, who was the group editorial director at Nation Media Group and Standard Group, or Farida Karoney, who was the chief operating officer at the Royal Media Services in Kenya, before being appointed a cabinet secretary. But you could create something entirely different; if you can't get a seat at the table, then you might as well make cocktail hours a thing and mill about cheerily rather than nervously wonder who's going to vacate the next chair. That's what Baraza Media Lab is for me - a place to reimagine, experiment and prototype new models of storytelling, reframe meaningful work as inhabiting a space, rather than a place, and ultimately cultivate a kind of revolutionary joy in the process.



Audiences will benefit from having more diverse stories and perspectives, including from those for whom commuting to the office has excluded their participation, such as people living with disabilities.

So, what's the newsroom of the future going to look like? I expect that remote, or some version of remote/in-person hybrid is here to stay, even after the Covid-19 pandemic ceases to be a threat. Media organisations will have to restructure newsroom workflows, processes and structures, and we'll all have to work hard to curate some kind of productive organisational culture in digital spaces – “I have nothing to add” cannot continue to be crutch response in distracted Zoom meetings. “Work-life balance” will become a weird, outdated misnomer – we are humans first and then workers, trying to fit life stuff into our work lives will finally be seen as the absurdity it has always been. News organisations could conceivably report more creatively on big, important stories with a nimbler and more dispersed, non-traditional reporter network. Audiences will benefit from having more diverse stories and perspectives, including from those for whom commuting to the office has excluded their participation, such as people living with disabilities.

To be successful in this hybrid world, Quartz [has curated some helpful tips](#)³ for workplace leaders – managers need to be aware of “proximity bias”, that is the tendency to assume you know those you see more often, which would disadvantage the career growth of those who might not come to the office that much. Employees should be evaluated on the basis of objective, output-based metrics - in the newsroom context being delivering a great story and not necessarily putting in more hours. And newsroom managers should never, ever, use productivity-tracking software to monitor workers such as webcams or keystroke recorders; it's humiliating for workers and unhelpful for measuring what makes a great story.

All said, I am optimistic about this brave new world. If for nothing else, I'd never imagined a decade ago that we'd finally be at the place where sending your story from home wouldn't be something that we'd be fighting over, where workplace hazing didn't need to be a rite of passage and where a pan-African weekly newspaper wouldn't have a website, and wouldn't even see the need for one.

³ <https://qz.com/work/2021945/17-principles-for-a-successful-hybrid-workplace/> Last accessed July 14, 2021.

Covering Uganda's pandemic election

Peter G. Mwesige

Elections generally test the media's ability to interrogate issues and empower citizens to make informed choices. Doing so during a pandemic presents even greater challenges, as this study of Uganda's 2021 election shows.

Monitoring media coverage of the electoral process is an important part of election observation.¹

This is because of the key role the media play in elections. The media (can) play five essential roles in elections: provision of information to enable voters make informed decisions; provision of platforms for debate through allowing exchange of opinions amongst the contending groups and citizens; acting as a watchdog for fairness during campaigning and polling; educating the public about election processes; and providing voice to the voters.²

¹ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2012). *Handbook on Media Monitoring for Election Observation Missions*. Warsaw, Poland.

² Marie-Soleil Frère (2010). *The Media and Elections in Post-Conflict Central African Countries*. Brussels: University of Brussels.



Chaotic scenes during the 2020, Uganda elections





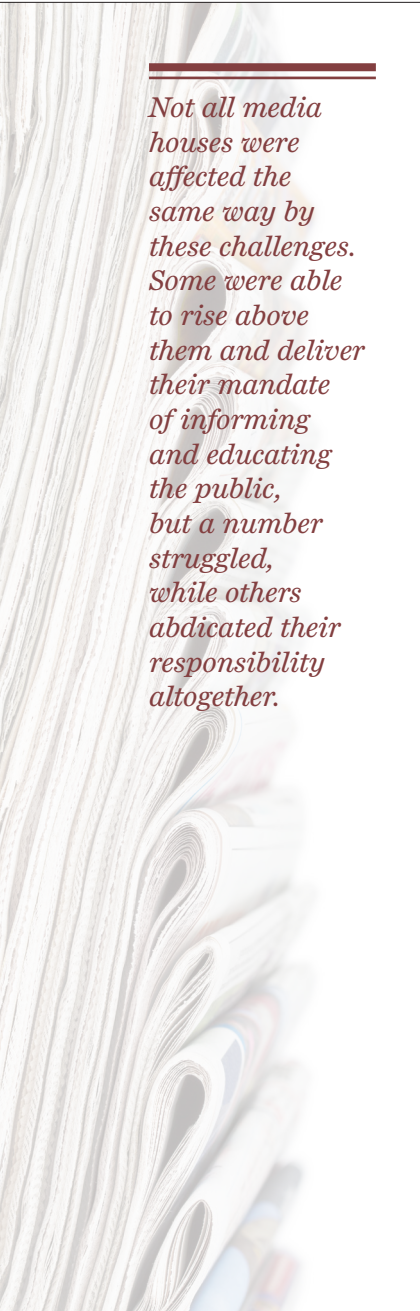
Ahead of Uganda's January 2021 General Election, media monitoring took on new significance after the Electoral Commission directed that campaigning should be conducted "scientifically" (i.e. soliciting votes largely through the media and digital platforms, rather than the usual public rallies and other canvassing techniques that were said to violate social-distancing regulations in response to the Covid-19 pandemic).

Monitoring reports from previous Ugandan elections had found several gaps in media coverage, including bias; inaccurate reporting; disproportionate attention to the incumbent in public media; denial of space or time for political advertising to opposition candidates; self-censorship and poor portrayal of women candidates. Other weaknesses included the disproportionate attention to candidates and political parties at the expense of voters; inadequate interrogation of candidate promises and claims; predominance of episodic reporting and dearth of issue-based coverage; as well a shortage of investigative reporting.

The African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME) set out to monitor media coverage of the 2021 elections with the view that gaps in and concerns about coverage should be addressed before the voting day. In other words, media monitoring was treated as a process of "constructive intervention". The goal of the project was to contribute to accurate, fair and balanced coverage.

The specific objectives were to monitor, document and share trends in media coverage; to monitor media compliance with election reporting guidelines and regulations; to influence journalists and media owners to provide information that was accurate and fair; and to empower civil society and the public to demand adherence to professional standards.

The January 2021 General Election presented a challenge for journalists and media houses alike. The Covid-19 pandemic, the violence unleashed by police and security agencies, intimidation and threats by political actors, regulatory overreach, unaccountable media owners, the commercial pressures on the industry, misinformation powered by social media, poor investment in journalism, and inexperience



Not all media houses were affected the same way by these challenges. Some were able to rise above them and deliver their mandate of informing and educating the public, but a number struggled, while others abdicated their responsibility altogether.

in the newsroom, combined to threaten independent journalism and the right to freedom of expression.

Not all media houses were affected the same way by these challenges. Some were able to rise above them and deliver their mandate of informing and educating the public, but a number struggled, while others abdicated their responsibility altogether.

Starting in October ACME, with support from the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), a donor fund-pooling initiative, systemically monitored how Ugandan media were covering the elections and produced monthly reports.

The reports explored the attention four major newspapers and a newsmagazine, television, and radio stations paid election-related issues as well as the nature of their coverage. The publications studied were the Vision Group's *Bukedde* (a Luganda-language daily that tops Uganda's print newspaper circulation) and the *New Vision*, the group's flagship, the *Daily Monitor*, *The Observer*, and *The Independent* newsmagazine. The television stations monitored were Baba TV, Bukedde TV, NBS, NTV, TV West, and UBC. Thirty-five radio stations, from the different regions were also monitored.

The monitoring relied mainly on quantitative content analysis to explore the volume of coverage of election-related issues by these selected media houses, the types of elections covered, the types of articles published (news, analysis, opinion and features), the reporting formats, the topics covered, and the tone of coverage. The analysis also covered the voices in the coverage, including the occupation and gender of sources.

The reports paid particular attention to the coverage of the 11 presidential candidates, focusing on who appeared on the front pages of the newspapers, the volume of coverage on each of them, how much space or airtime was dedicated to each candidate and the tone of coverage of the contenders.

As the campaigns went on, a number of opposition candidates were denied access to radio stations where they had paid for talk shows. In most cases, these actions were at the behest of area police commanders and resident district commissioners. Other radio stations simply steered clear of opposition candidates on orders of their owners or managers.

The immediate environment

For many Ugandan journalists and media houses in the thick of the action, covering the 2021 elections was a whole new experience. The Covid-19 pandemic posed health threats to journalists, while the government's response also made it impossible for them to interact physically with many sources, including candidates. The pandemic also forced media houses, already grappling with the disruption caused by digital and social media, to make significant cutbacks on investments, including letting go of some of their journalists. Some of the journalists covering the campaigns were not sure they would still be employed after the Election Day.

Although the Electoral Commission's push for a "scientific election" gave hope to media managers that they would be able recoup the losses occasioned by the multi-year trend of falling audiences and the dip in advertising, there was always a risk that it would be difficult to balance between the public interest mission of journalism and the imperative to make a profit. Would media houses give enough time to regular election coverage or would they sell their space and time with reckless abandon to candidates lining up for paid-for programmes and advertising?

As the campaigns went on, a number of opposition candidates were denied access to radio stations where they had paid for talk shows. In most cases, these actions were at the behest of area police commanders and resident district commissioners. Other radio stations simply steered clear of opposition candidates on orders of their owners or managers. On some stations, no opposition content was aired throughout the campaign.

In October 2020, the Uganda Communications Commission and the Electoral Commission issued guidelines for media coverage of the General Election³. The preamble recognised the central role the media play in the electoral process: providing the public with information on which to base their decisions; facilitating public debate on the choices; and providing a voice to voters. Further, it under-

³ https://mediacouncil.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Electoral-Commission-Media-Guidelines-for-General-Elections_2.pdf

It is notable that for the most part, the Electoral Commission remained silent in the face of these violations against journalists and the media. By Election Day, there had been no arrest or prosecution of any person involved in attacks on journalists.

scored that free, independent, responsible and pluralistic media were critical to advancing and sustaining democracy and peaceful, free and fair elections, and that the constitution and other legislation guarantee all citizens the right of freedom of speech and expression, as well as the right of access to information.

Unfortunately, journalists operated in a hostile and toxic environment, and endured several cases of wanton mistreatment by the police and other security agencies. Between the time the campaigns started in November 2020 to the election day on January 14, 2021, ACME registered at least two dozen incidents involving the harassment, detention, assault and injury of journalists, and damage or loss of their property – perpetrated by various State security agencies, and sometimes agents and supporters of the different presidential candidates.

As the campaigning wore on, the attacks on journalists appeared to become more brutal and targeted, and they were widely seen as a move to keep them off the campaign trail. On December 29, two journalists were injured after police fired at them as they dispersed supporters of the National Unity Platform (NUP) presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi aka Bobi Wine. Two days later, journalists covering Kyagulanyi on the island district of Kalangala on Lake Victoria were teargassed and a number of them detained and questioned for live-streaming the stand-off between NUP supporters (many of whom were arrested) and State security agents.

It is notable that for the most part, the Electoral Commission remained silent in the face of these violations against journalists and the media. By Election Day, there had been no arrest or prosecution of any person involved in attacks on journalists.

This hostile environment was compounded by a directive the Media Council of Uganda (MCU) issued on December 10 (mother of ironies), the UN Human Rights Day. It required all practising journalists to register for accreditation, or risk losing the right to cover the 2021 elections and other public events. In the same directive, the regulator asked all foreign journalists to get new accreditation cards and





Opposition candidate Bobi Wine casting his ballot.

Media houses that had invested in elaborate plans for the Election Day coverage had to make do with SMS and expensive voice calls to get updates from their field reporters. At the same time, they were unable to tap into the many leads that social media usually opens up during such major national events.

obtain a special media pass “showing particular geographical or thematic areas of intended media coverage” of the electoral campaigns.

The media fraternity protested the move, especially because it came in the middle of an election campaign when many journalists were already covering candidates and had documented several cases of illegalities and excesses by police and State functionaries as they went about regulating public meetings and rallies by opposition candidates. The move was widely seen as a ploy to stifle media scrutiny of the electoral process as well as gag critical and independent journalism.

The Uganda Editors Guild, the Hub for Freedom of Expression, and the Centre for Public Interest Law (CEPIL) went to court for a review because the Media Council’s directive was “illegal, irregular and irrational”. They also applied for a temporary injunction, stopping the Media Council and other agencies, including the police, from implementing the directive on accreditation. Meanwhile, the police issued a statement on December 30, warning that they would not allow journalists who were not accredited by the Media Council to cover the elections.

Justice Esta Nambayo of the High Court, who heard the case, had promised to deliver her ruling by email on the Election Day. This never happened after the government ordered the shutdown of the Internet and social media a day before the elections, a move that had wide-ranging effects, not only on media coverage, but also on the transparency of the elections. Media houses that had invested in elaborate plans for the Election Day coverage had to make do with SMS and expensive voice calls to get updates from their field reporters. At the same time, they were unable to tap into the many leads that social media usually opens up during such major national events.

As for the Media Council’s directive, the court quashed it, four days after the presidential and parliamentary elections, “for being illegal, irrational and procedurally irregular”. The court also issued an “order of permanent injunction...restraining the (government’s) security agencies from implementing the illegal and irrational directives of the Media Council of Uganda”.

Ugandan newspapers, radio and television dedicated lots of space and time to election coverage over the short campaign period. For the most part, the media were able to give voters important reference points to decode what was happening ahead of the elections. Some media houses did better than others, and so did some journalists.

Although the delayed ruling by Justice Nambayo was mute regarding the presidential and parliamentary elections, she noted that the local government elections, to be held on January 20, were part of the General Election (and therefore journalists could cover them without accreditation from the Media Council.

The court declared that “the registration of journalists by the Media Council of Uganda without an operational National Institute of Journalists of Uganda (NIJU) to enrol journalists in accordance with the Press and Journalists Act, is illegal, irrational and procedurally irregular”.

Although there were not many reports of journalists who had been stopped from covering the elections on account of missing the Media Council’s accreditation cards (the Electoral Commission had later disregarded this and carried out its own accreditation for those who would cover events at the national tally centre), there was an environment of uncertainty for many in the media.

Key takeaways from findings

Ugandan newspapers, radio and television dedicated lots of space and time to election coverage over the short campaign period. For the most part, the media were able to give voters important reference points to decode what was happening ahead of the elections. Some media houses did better than others, and so did some journalists.

But the courage and enterprise that some big media houses showed should not lull us into concluding all was well. The dynamism shown by some of the big media houses easily masked the challenges under which most of the country’s newsrooms, and especially those at upcountry radio stations, which are the major sources of news for most Ugandans, operate.

The findings of ACME’s monitoring suggest that a citizen who depended on a small number of media outlets will have struggled to find accurate information about, and make sense of, the whole range of events and issues that electoral cycle presented.

Politics and power play; election management; violence; and justice, rights, law and order, were the top topics in media coverage. Policy and the bread and butter issues, that many voters would presumably care about, played second fiddle.

Although the top three candidates all received significant coverage across the three media platforms monitored, incumbency as well as pressure and sense of fear within newsrooms operated by publicly owned media houses, gave President Yoweri Museveni the edge overall. As the elections drew closer, most stories on Museveni were either about campaign promises, commissioning or launching of public infrastructure, or citizen demands, while coverage of his major opponents focused disproportionately on their arrests, or non-adherence to Covid-19 response guidelines.

Politics and power play; election management; violence; and justice, rights, law and order, were the top topics in media coverage. Policy and the bread and butter issues, that many voters would presumably care about, played second fiddle.

Event-based, as opposed to issue-based, reporting dominated the election coverage, with radio performing the worst. The campaign rally and stump speeches were, by far, the biggest source of election news in newspapers and on television. Radio, on the other hand, relied far more on press conferences than campaign rallies. “Scientific election” strategies that were supposed to be employed did not receive that much attention, where they were deployed.

Worse still, a lot of the reporting did not provide sufficient background and context or depth. This lack of analysis was particularly pronounced on radio. For example, a typical story would report that Museveni’s main challenger Kyagulanyi had been arrested for violating Covid-19 guidelines, including the prohibition of mass rallies. But it would not mention that long before the pandemic, Ugandan police and security forces had invoked the Public Order Management Act (sections of which have since been declared unconstitutional by Ugandan courts) to curtail opposition consultative meetings and rallies.

To their credit, however, many Ugandan journalists, often at great risk to their own safety, captured the high levels of violence against opposition candidates and their supporters throughout the campaigns. Often missing, though, was the fact that this violence was part of an established pattern over the last 20 years.



The use of the right of reply was generally not respected across all media platforms. Although newspapers did significantly better, a majority of stories where candidates were attacked did not offer those on the receiving end an opportunity to respond.

Overall, most stories that carried candidate claims or promises did not subject them to scrutiny. Voters were left to decide for themselves what made sense or was plausible.

There was no investigative election reporting in the two weeks before the elections. And the proportion of enterprise stories also decreased, leaving straight hard-news reporting to dominate coverage. Once again, radio performed the worst on this measure. Newspapers did better, but only marginally. Enterprise and investigation had also been largely absent in November and December.

Single-sourcing bedevilled coverage throughout the campaign period, leaving voters short of the perspectives and completeness that come with the use of multiple sources.

However, although presidential and parliamentary candidates, as well as political party officials were the most frequently cited sources, newspapers and television brought a significant percentage of ordinary people into the debate.

The challenge of gender imbalance in reporting was glaring throughout the campaign period, with women making up just about one in every five sources.

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Explaining the coverage

Despite these challenges, journalists, journalism educators, and politicians lauded the media for covering the campaigns intensively in an unusual and difficult period. Most established media houses received plaudits for covering all the candidates, particularly those standing on political party tickets, dedicating a substantial amount of time and space to the campaigns as the Election Day drew closer, and introducing new features to explain the issues.



Reporters and editors cited several constraints, including the following:

- Restrictions on movement and lack of access to sources due to Covid-19 response measures.
- Attacks on journalists by police and security forces.
- Cutbacks in investment in journalism due to the effects of the pandemic on the media business.
- Not having enough ‘boots on the ground’ (reporters).
- Inexperienced reporters (and sometimes editors) and the associated low institutional memory in many newsrooms.
- Ill-prepared journalists, lack of skills, knowledge or poor attitude.
- Newsroom cultures that don’t privilege depth, context and explanation.
- Inadequate newsroom planning for election coverage.
- Bribery of journalists.
- Intimidation from regulators, government officials, and in some cases opposition supporters.
- Self-censorship, particularly from fear of attracting the wrath of government officials and the political elite.
- Commercial pressures on media houses.
- Media owners who were either only looking at the bottom line or could not allow opposition candidates on their radio stations.
- The move by the Media Council to accredit journalists covering the elections.



Media houses need to have a plan for election coverage and a commitment to follow it. Above all, they need to invest in their journalism.

Lessons

Journalists, just like election observers, should always remember that elections are not an event. They are a process, which includes the passing of legislation and regulations, planning and management by the electoral body, political party primaries, candidate nominations, campaigning, election day, declaration of results and petitions. The media have a duty to shine the torch on the whole process, paying particular attention to its fairness and legitimacy.

The key questions to ask throughout the process include the following: Is the playing field level? Were electoral reforms passed? If so, were they passed in time? How was the preparedness of the electoral body? What is the message of the candidates/parties? Are the voters conversant with the electoral process? Is voter education adequate? What issues are the voters interested in? What are the candidate/party strategies? What stands out? Who is leading according to the opinion polls? Are the polls credible? How have the candidates/parties performed in previous elections? What is the role of money in the elections?

Media houses need to have a plan for election coverage and a commitment to follow it. Above all, they need to invest in their journalism.

Given the abundance of information today, the media need to be creative about how to deliver news that adds value to the voter. They should leverage technology and give a voice to ordinary people who will be affected by the outcome of the election.

The media's loyalty should be to citizens and the truth, and no effort should be spared to ensure that citizens receive accurate information about the elections. Multiple-sourcing will help in the search for the truth.

Candidates and their parties come into elections to win. Throughout the campaign, they will make promises, some genuine and reasonable, others outlandish. The media owe it to the voters to scrutinise the claims and promises of the candidates and parties.



Unfounded speculation that has the potential of inflaming tensions should be avoided. But truth and justice should not be sacrificed in the name of peace.

Reporting should be accompanied by sufficient context that helps citizens make sense of what is unfolding.

Finally, to the journalists: Get it right, reject bribery, and steer clear of vested interests. Above all, your safety comes first. Take all the precautions to secure it, including staying clear of scenes of violence. Dead reporters tell no stories.

Note: *This essay has been culled from four monitoring reports that ACME published ahead of the January 2021 elections.*

Conclusions: Will Windhoek +30 Declaration serve posterity?

George Nyabuga

A variety of contextual, technological cultural, social, political and economic factors have and continue to shape the global media environment. Much has changed since the birth of the Windhoek Declaration, more than 30 years ago, and a critical reflection of the period shows that changes in the global media, political and economic environment have not been very favourable to the industry.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges facing contemporary media and journalism. As the Director-General of Unesco, Ms Audrey Azoulay, pointed out on the World Press Freedom Day of 2021, “the pandemic has also exacerbated existing challenges, with numerous media now facing financial losses. The power of Internet platforms has been further entrenched, with lockdowns forcing much of daily life online. And false information and rumours have flourished, in some cases with fatal consequences”.

Such statements raise serious questions about the place and roles of the media



and journalism in society amid concerns that press freedom is waning across the world due to numerous factors, including political intolerance and impunity, vigilantism and criminality and economic pressures occasioned by falling revenues.

The Covid-19 pandemic introduced other dynamics, some of them threatening democracy and press freedom around the world. Organisations such as the Freedom House were left worried, and indicated as much in its Freedom in the World 2021 report in which it declared that democracy is under siege.¹ “As a lethal pandemic, economic and physical insecurity, and violent conflict ravaged the world in 2020, democracy’s defenders sustained heavy new losses in their struggle against authoritarian foes, shifting the international balance in favour of tyranny,” Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz write in the first part of the report.

“Incumbent leaders increasingly used force to crush opponents and settle scores, sometimes in the name of public health, while beleaguered activists—lacking effective international support—faced heavy jail sentences, torture, or murder in many settings. These withering blows marked the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The countries experiencing deterioration outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin recorded since the negative trend began in 2006. The long democratic recession is deepening.”

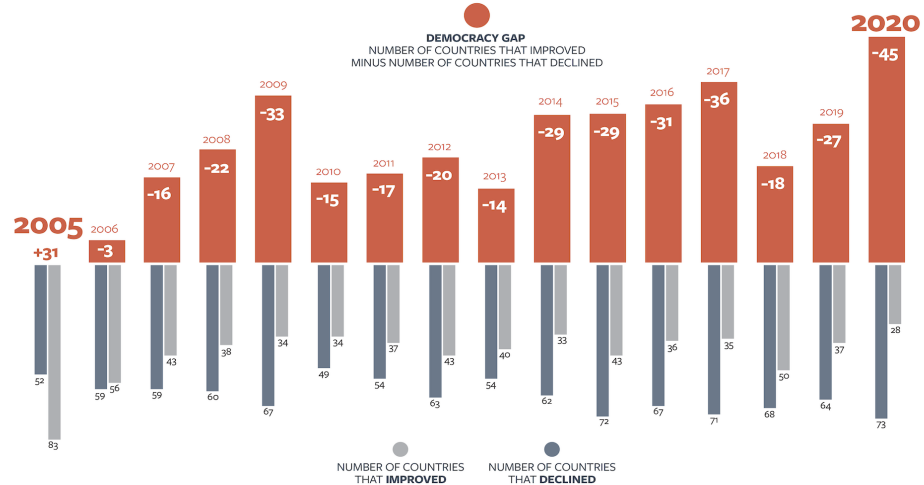
The reports and pronouncements of various individuals and organisations support the serious concerns about press freedom in the world, and question the roles and responsibilities of governments and other actors in upholding the Windhoek Declaration. Thus, the core question that the contents of this addresses is: is Windhoek Declaration fit for purpose? Will the Windhoek +30 Declaration survive the test of time, given the rate of technological changes and other global developments? Will, for example, the media survive the post-Covid-19 era? And what will it look and feel like if it survives the pandemic and the attendant political, economic and social developments?

¹ See Freedom House (2021) Freedom in the World 2021. Freedom House [online]. Available at < https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf >



A Growing Democracy Gap: 15 Years of Decline

Countries with aggregate score declines in *Freedom in the World* have outnumbered those with gains every year for the past 15 years.



Source: Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>)

There are numerous other questions that require urgent answers and interventions. Nonetheless, the exponential change in the global media environment offers serious food for thought as we are invited to consider the wider social, political, economic, cultural, historical, and technological contexts that shape media and journalism in the contemporary society. Granted, the changes offer opportunities and pose threats to journalists, the media and the press freedom. For example, there is no gainsaying that Covid-19 has seriously affected economies, which in turn has negatively impacted the media. In essence, as conversations prior to and during the World Press Freedom Day 2021 celebration revealed, most media houses in the global south and especially Africa, are staring death in the face due to the ensuing financial crunch. Thus, media independence and viability have gained



To support calls for independence and sustainability, for example, numerous suggestions were made, including that the media should be free to operate and should be protected against political, economic, social, advertiser and any other threats, influences and manipulations; media should be free from all forms of censorship; transparency and accountability

prominence in the current discourses. This is largely because an unsustainable media cannot be independent, and resisting and overcoming covert and overt economic and political pressures become difficult, if not impossible, in the struggle for survival. It also becomes difficult to guarantee editorial independence in such situations. Consequently, as seen earlier, the suggestions by journalists and other stakeholders that participated in the World Press Freedom Day regional and global conversations is that there is a need to guarantee media independence and sustainability as part of and strengthening its role in the production and sharing of information.

To support calls for independence and sustainability, for example, numerous suggestions were made, including that the media should be free to operate and should be protected against political, economic, social, advertiser and any other threats, influences and manipulations; media should be free from all forms of censorship; transparency and accountability of ownership is critical to its sustainability and efforts should be put in place to guard against monopolisation, and that states should amend laws that hinder the free flow of information. Other suggestions indicated that states should commit resources for media development like they do for other sectors, and leave media ethics management, control and censorship to independent professional entities; states should privilege self-regulation, involving the media and related sectors to ensure greater participation of the industry in its own regulation, and that states should facilitate access to universal, equitable, stable and affordable internet services as an enabler to the right to information. There were numerous suggestions, but the aforementioned are given special attention because of the role states and governments are expected to play in safeguarding the media space and enhancing sustainability.

In addition to independence and sustainability, key matters of the transparency of online platforms, as a pillar for information to remain a public good, media and information literacy, human capital development, legal and policy reforms, the safety and security and the working conditions of journalists, formed part of the



There were numerous suggestions, but the aforementioned are given special attention because of the role states and governments are expected to play in safeguarding the media space and enhancing sustainability.

various discussions. Although it is not always easy to find solutions to the numerous challenges, the World Press Freedom Day offers a good opportunity to reconsider the place of the media, even in the fluid current environment. Such fluidity, however, as some of the articles in this journal show, should not be an excuse for the media not to continue serving public interest, being emancipatory and democratic and enhancing its role and commitment to offer information as a public good. In this context, the Windhoek +30 Declaration offers hope that the world will continue to uphold press freedom as part of appreciating and celebrating the place of the media in society.



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Appendix



Windhoek+30 Declaration World Press Freedom Day 2021

“Information as a Public Good – 30 years of the Windhoek Declaration” We, the participants at the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day International Conference, held in Windhoek, Namibia, 29 April – 3 May 2021,

- 1. Recalling** Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), which states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”;
- 2. Commemorating** the continuing relevance, legacy and role of the 1991 Windhoek Declaration as a catalyst for the proclamation of World Press Freedom Day, and as an inspiration for ongoing action to promote and protect freedom of expression, free, independent and pluralistic media, and access to information around the world;
- 3. Appreciating** the impact and legacy of the regional declarations adopted in the wake of the Windhoek Declaration, namely the Alma Ata, Santiago, Sana’a and Sofia Declarations;
- 4. Recalling** the 2001 African Charter on Broadcasting adopted on the 10th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration in 2001, and the Pan-African Declaration on Access to Information adopted on the 20th anniversary in 2011;



5. **Reaffirming** paragraph 5 of the 1991 Windhoek Declaration, which states: “The world- wide trend towards democracy and freedom of information and expression is a fundamental contribution to the fulfilment of human aspirations.”;
6. **Emphasising** that information is a public good to which everyone is entitled and, as such, is both a means and an end for the fulfilment of collective human aspirations, including the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union’s Agenda 2063;
7. **Convinced** that, as a public good, information empowers citizens to exercise their fundamental rights, supports gender equality, and allows for participation and trust in democratic governance and sustainable development, leaving no one behind; and that information as a public good is also a key underpinning of effective measures to address global emergencies, such as climate and health crises, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic;
8. **Recognising** the role of journalism in producing and disseminating public interest information, especially in times of crisis, and emphasising the overriding importance of this role remaining free from capture or distorting influence;
9. **Acknowledging** the far-reaching transformations of the information ecosystem since the adoption of the 1991 Windhoek Declaration, in particular the digital transformation and the enormous role played by the Internet and digital platforms in facilitating the sharing of knowledge and information, including for vulnerable, marginalised groups, independent journalists and human rights organisations;
10. **Recalling** the UN Secretary General’s Roadmap for Digital Co-operation and UNESCO’s Internet principles of human rights, openness, accessibility and multi-stakeholder governance (ROAM);



- 11. Concerned** at the increasing proliferation, amplification and promotion, through human and automated systems, of potentially harmful content digitally, including disinformation and hate speech, which undermines people’s rights and the quality of collective public debate;
- 12. Cognisant** of the fact that there are no easy solutions to modern digital challenges which are both effective in addressing potential harms and yet maintain respect for freedom of expression as guaranteed under international law;
- 13. Alarmed** by both enduring and new threats to the safety of journalists and the free exercise of journalism, including killings, harassment of women, offline and online attacks, intimidation and the promotion of fear, and arbitrary detentions, as well as the adoption of laws which unduly restrict freedom of expression and access to information in the name, among other things, of prohibiting false information, protecting national security and combating violent extremism; and also deeply concerned at the increasing numbers of Internet disruptions, including Internet shutdowns, particularly during elections and protests;
- 14. Troubled** by the severe economic crisis which is posing an existential threat to independent news media worldwide, and recalling that economic sustainability of free media is a key prerequisite for its independence, as enshrined in paragraph 2 of the 1991 Windhoek Declaration, which states: “By an independent press, we mean a press independent from governmental, political and economic control or from control of materials and infrastructure essential for the production and dissemination of newspapers, magazines and periodicals.”;
- 15. Highlighting** the urgency of equipping citizens worldwide, including youth and marginalised groups, with media and information literacy competences, developed through a gender sensitive approach, to enable them to navigate



the evolving information landscape, and to promote freedom of expression and access to information as a public good.

We therefore:

Call on all governments to:

- 16. Commit** to creating a positive enabling environment for freedom of expression and access to information, online and offline, in line with international guarantees of these rights, including a free, independent and pluralistic media, through adopting appropriate legal measures in a transparent manner and following adequate public consultation, guaranteeing the exercise of journalism free of governmental interference, whether formal or informal, promoting universal access to the Internet, and taking measures to reinforce the safety of journalists, including with a specific focus on women journalists;
- 17. Take** effective steps to nurture a diversity of viable public, private and community media, and implement specific policies, along with relevant safeguards, to promote the production of independent, quality journalism, with the aim of ensuring people's access to relevant, diverse and reliable information;
- 18. Ensure** that flows of funding from public sources to the media, including subsidies and advertising, are allocated fairly and overseen in an independent and transparent manner; and guarantee investment in journalism and jobs, while respecting gender equality and promoting decent working conditions;
- 19. Mainstream** media and information literacy into strategies and action plans in order to build the resilience of citizens to misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, and promote civic participation in democratic life;
- 20. Allocate** adequate human, financial and technical resources, including as part of development assistance



support, to ensure the proper implementation of the steps and measures outlined in this Declaration.

Call on UNESCO and other intergovernmental organisations to:

- 21. Reinforce** cooperation with governments and civil society organisations in order to safeguard and enhance guarantees for the full exercise of the right to information and freedom of expression, both online and offline, with a particular focus on strengthening media freedom, pluralism and independence as well as media viability, transparency of digital platforms, and media and information literacy;
- 22. Encourage** the development of joint funding instruments supported by a combination of States, multilateral institutions, private foundations and philanthropists to promote information as a public good.

Call on technology companies to:

- 23. Work** to ensure transparency in relation to their human and automated systems which could impact user interaction with content, as well as their terms and conditions of service;
- 24. Provide** robust notice and appeals opportunities to users, process complaints and redress requests from users in a fair manner, and take action whenever their terms and conditions of service are breached;
- 25. Conduct** transparent human rights risk assessments, including to identify threats to freedom of expression, access to information and privacy, take appropriate action to eliminate or mitigate those threats, and disclose the impact of those actions;
- 26. Support** information as a public good in various ways, for example through fair and inclusive partnership arrangements, which may include donations or other financial measures, and the protection of journalists who are the victims or at risk of online attacks.



Call on journalists, media outlets, civil society and academia to:

- 27. Advocate** with States and digital platforms, as part of their wider protection of freedom of expression and information as a public good, to recognise media viability as a development priority;
- 28. Undertake** monitoring, advocacy, research, policy development, awareness raising, including among official actors, and the provision of expertise and support to address problems caused by measures taken by governments and digital platforms, including due to their lack of transparency, and to increase their engagement in media and information literacy actions;
- 29. Promote** a more inclusive, pluralistic and sustainable media sector, including through measures that promote the involvement of young people, women and marginalised groups in the media.

Call to collective action:

- 30. Work together** to ensure the effective realisation of the steps and measures outlined in this Declaration;
- 31. Agree and adopt** new and innovative measures and mechanisms, including of a multilateral and multi-stakeholder nature, following broad consultative processes, to ensure respect by States for freedom of expression and access to information, and that digital platforms' practices and systems which affect user interaction with information are appropriately transparent;
- 32. Collaborate** through multilateral fora to promote respect by governments, intergovernmental organisations and digital platforms for human rights, including freedom of expression, access to information and the safety of journalists.



The world today faces critical new and historic challenges to freedom of expression which require concerted global action by all stakeholders. The 1991 Windhoek Declaration was a bold and forward-looking statement that has helped to change the world for the better over the last 30 years.

It is now time for the generation of 2021 to make our contribution.

Press freedom, independence and pluralism remain major goals to guarantee information as a public good that serves as a shared resource for the whole of humanity. To these goals we now add those of media viability, transparency of digital platforms, and citizens empowered with media and information literacy.

This Windhoek+30 Declaration pays tribute to those who opened up this path. Now, let each of us resolve to do our part to help secure information as a public good as an urgent need today, and as a legacy for those who come after us.

In closing, we express appreciation to the government and people of Namibia for hosting the historic World Press Freedom Conference. Their generosity has opened the road to take forward information as a public good.

About this book

More than 30 years ago on May 3, 1991, the Windhoek Declaration for the Development of a Free, Independent and Pluralistic Press (often just the Windhoek Declaration) was born. The Windhoek Declaration in turn gave birth to the World Press Freedom Day in 1993. Since then, the Day is celebrated annually on the 3rd of May. According to UNESCO, the day “serves as an occasion to inform citizens of violations of press freedom – a reminder that in dozens of countries, publications are censored, fined, suspended and closed down, while journalists and publishers are harassed, attacked, detained and even murdered. It is a date to encourage and develop initiatives in favour of press freedom, and to assess the state of press freedom worldwide.” A lot has, as is expected, changed over the years. The media is not the same as it was in 1991. A variety of contextual, technological cultural, social, political and economic factors have and continue to shape the global media environment. The factors, and the current Covid-19 pandemic, have undoubtedly changed the media environment, forcing journalists and the media to start confronting and dealing with new realities that threaten their place and roles.

This monograph offers a critical reflection on a number of issues that have shaped the media environment, the new challenges and realities confronting the media and journalists, and what the Windhoek +30 Declaration portends for the future of the media and journalism.

The Eastern Africa Editors Society is happy to present this collection and hopes it will inspire research, critical or thoughtful responses and reflections on the current state of the media and journalism, as well press freedom around the world.

About the Eastern Africa Editors Society

The Eastern Africa Editors Society is the umbrella body bringing together editor organisations in Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, namely: Ethiopia Editors’ Guild, Kenya Editors’ Guild, Uganda Editors’ Guild and Tanzania Editors Forum.

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