An Overview of Kenya’s Media Historical Developments: A Legacy of Persistent Threats and Impediments

1. Introduction

The origin of the mass media industry in Kenya and how this industry has performed from its inception to this modern-day is a subject that is inextricably enmeshed in a set of debates within scholarly media discourses. However, in such debates, it is possible to realize that the media owners’ role is inchoate in discussions about media performance throughout its existence. At the very least, these owners’ role in the way the media has operated in the past and today should, in no small extent, be enshrined in these discussions. Also, in these discussions, the surfacing of Kenya’s political conditions through her successive regimes should not be given too limited a field of view. This brief article argues that such conditions and the media ownership should be entwined in deliberations and creation of spaces where debates regarding media’s performance in the past and the present can occur through the prism of balanced evidence.

Such an argument is critical, given the media critics’ extreme opposite approach to media as a platform that underpins a legacy of expedient use in Kenya. In this context, such use impedes media’s responsiveness to the marginalized needs, which should practically be achieved through information conveyance and mass education. An engagement with evidence and experts’ opinions suggests that a nation’s good governance is achieved through increased avenues for information dissemination and education for all, brought to the fore by the media. In this sense, this article focuses on Kenya’s media’s investment in availing education and balanced information to all. Such exploration is based on a broad stroke review from this media’s establishment to this modern-day.

This article argues that Kenya’s media has struggled to realise its mandate effectively from its time of establishment to this day. The current consensus-based claim is that several external forces have contributed to this inefficiency. This article’s ensuing discussion provides groundwork and pedestal for confronting, rather than ignoring, the external forces that have had a legacy of impeding the Kenyan media from implementing its responsibilities. This discussion is built in the context of three distinct political phases in the history of Kenya; the colonial era, the one-party state era, and the multiparty era.

2. Analysing the Kenyan Media Landscape in Historical Terms

As noted in the introduction of this article, a central purpose of this review is to map out the media’s broader historical developments in Kenya and in this way, provide a lens for looking at the media’s performance within such history. It deals with this broader history as it can be traced from the period in which media was established in Kenya to this contemporary moment. With this timeframe in mind, this section presents a broad-stroke sketch of the media’s performance through three critical distinct political dispensions in this local context. The following discussion focuses on these three in turn.
2.1. Kenya’s Media in the Colonial Era 1895-1962

2.1.1. The Early Years of Colonisation (1895-1920)

The reviewed historical body of written works points out that the early years of colonization in Kenya represented a ruthless and effective form of manipulation and control by a small group of very powerful individuals. This group is understood to have had a firm grip on its subjugation, and they succeeded in making all local communities in Kenya accept their established system of authority (Burnell & Randall, 2008; Onyango, 2015). In ensuring that they successfully maintained this system of authority, this small and powerful group employed a thin administration that mainly consisted of its minority population. This administration worked towards establishing a loyal and more secure dominion founded on its people’s tradition and western civilization. They pursued their interests and had no interest in understanding the African culture (Burnell & Randall, 2008; Ochieng, 1985; Onyango, 2015).

It is noted in historical accounts of the establishment of media in Kenya that this small group founded and became the only media owners during the country’s early years of colonization. This group mainly comprised of immigrants, missionaries, and colonial masters. The only earliest form of media that was founded and owned by these individuals was the printing press. One example of this press is the ‘Taveta Chronicle’, published by a church missionary society in 1895. The other examples include the ‘leader’ and the ‘Uganda mail’, which were first published in 1899 by a British East African Company (Ochilo, 1993).

It is of interest to note that these earliest forms of mass media mainly targeted the two most influential groups of people. The first one was the white elites who lived in Kenya and England. The second group included a small number of people of the South Asian ancestry who lived in Kenya. Available literature suggests that in these early years of colonization, this media met these two groups’ interests in three main ways. The first was through maintaining an unequal status quo by legitimizing the rights of the colonial masters to rule Kenya. On the same note, the one that targeted South Asian ancestry people worked towards legitimizing Asians’ second place to whites in Kenya. The second way was through providing these two powerful groups with news and information. For instance, in the case of the white elites residing in Kenya, it is explained that the majority of their media’s news and information came from England, which was their original home. The third way the earliest form of media met these most potent groups’ needs was by giving them a platform for social communication amongst themselves. Historical literature suggests that this was particularly important for the colonial masters since many were scattered across different parts of the country (Ochilo, 1993).

From the brief discussion in this section, it is clear that the establishment of media in Kenya became a reality in the 1890s during the country’s early years of colonization. As already established, this media was invested in serving the needs and interests of the small but the most influential groups in the region, rather than every person, including the subjugated group of people. It would seem that such media’s performance was bolstered through its control by the most potent groups. In this vein, the next discussion explores this media’s performance, further, as colonialism became firmly established in Kenya.

2.1.2. The Period in Which Colonial Rule Was Well Established (1920-1962)

In literature dealing with the local history of media in Kenya, it is argued that the continued use of ruthless structures of subjugation by the small and influential group of individuals annoyed many people within the native communities. Most Kenyans from these communities were particularly affronted by structures that aided the small and powerful in grabbing their land. They were further angered by their forceful provision of cheap labour to the same individuals that had grabbed their land. The literature generally notes that given that a considerable number of individuals within these native communities had since managed to acquire western education and knowledge, they felt that the time had come to fight against such atrocious acts. It is argued in this context that these individuals, famously referred to as the African nationalists, sought independence as the way out of these atrocities (Mamdani, 1996; Ochieng, 1985; Onyango, 2015).

When it comes to processes geared towards attaining such independence, commentators posit that these African nationalists considered establishing their form of media as the first step. The reviewed literature points out that they made this consideration a reality by finally venturing into the ownership of the mass media, which took the form of a printing press. Reference to such printing press includes ‘Tangazo’ which was launched in 1921, ‘Muigwithania’ whose first publication emerged in 1928, ‘Luo’s magazine’ in 1937 and ‘Sauti ya Mwafrika’ whose launch was in 1945. It is understood that these publications became a success with the help of the Asian community. In this context, reference is made to the Asian entrepreneurs who played a significant role in supporting the African nationalists in the production of these publications (Nyanjom & Ong’olo, 2012).

At the time of their production, these publications are understood to have targeted the native Africans. However, it is argued that this audience was, at the time, small and limited, given that they often comprised a part of the smaller cultural communities. Reference is made, for example, to one publication known as the Ramogi press, which was established to serve the marginalised Luo population (Frederiksen, 2011). It is argued that publications such as this one benefited native Africans primarily by addressing their demands, including freedom, justice, and equality. In this regard, it would seem that the extent of political content within these publications was relatively high. Indeed, commentary posits that such publications provided a fulcrum for political action, which was essentially fundamental to the future realisation of independence goals. In this sense, it is argued that this media’s overall concern was not on journalistic professionalism, but instead on mobilising Africans to fight for independence (Frederiksen, 2011; Ochiol, 1993; Oriare et al., 2010).
By addressing the demands of political independence, it is clear that this form of media, which the African nationalists owned, was not acting at the behest of the colonial government as its mouthpiece. This is rather obvious given that most of the publications that these individuals owned were overly critical towards this government (Frederiksen, 2011). It is argued in the literature that this critical approach presented these publications with numerous challenges. One of these included more robust controls by the colonial government. Indeed, commentators argue that the analysis of African publications can be approached better through the lens of censorship and suppression (Frederiksen, 2011; Oriare & Mshindi, 2008). In 1952, for example, the colonial government is understood to have banned all the African publications and further introduced new legislation to strictly control the sector (Oriare & Mshindi, 2008).

Another challenge that is understood to have bedevilled these publications was the state’s lack of financial support. Of course, this would have been expected, given the colonial government’s discomfort with them. It is noted in the literature that the only way these publications could survive was through making profits. In this sense, these publications were purely commercial in nature. Even though they were, to a certain extent, market-driven, accounts of the reviewed literature suggest that they struggled to make profits through advertisements and sales. This struggle was real, and many of them did not survive; in other words, they were short-lived (Frederiksen, 2011).

It is evident in this discussion that as colonialism became so entrenched in Kenya, the colonial government invested more time in consolidating its control over the media, especially the one that had been established by the African nationalists. We saw that this government tightened its control over such media in various ways, including introducing stricter legislation that would allow them to ban such media at any given time. Indeed, it is clear that the colonial government relied on such traditional forms of control to safeguard their oppressive rule. The next discussion explores such control in the context of the country’s new political dispensation.

2.2. Kenya’s Media during the One Party State’s Era 1978-1992

There is a consensus-based argument within the reviewed literature that immediately after Kenya attained her political independence in 1963, the country’s new government began to show some discomfort with the independence’s constitution, which among many of its democratic components, provided for a multi-party system of governance. It is argued in this context that shortly after independence, the new government, led by its traditional ruling party, embarked on a long process of making Kenya a one-party state (Kajirwa, 2008; Wanyande, 1995). Kenya’s parliament is understood to have assisted the government in this endeavour by passing a law that forbade the formation of another political party other than the ruling one. This law’s passage meant that Kenya had officially transpired into a civilian one-party system where restriction of political activity began to take effect (Wanyande, 1995). An iterative review of literature posits that such restriction brought more harm than good. In particular, it is argued that democracy, which had been ailing since independence, came to an abrupt end. It is noted in the literature that this was not surprising since the traditional ruling party had shown all intent of clinging onto power by whichever means, including curtailing the movement of people and many of their other freedoms (Wanyande, 1995; Kajirwa, 2008).

Several sources indicate that political activity restriction during the one-party state’s era also extended to the mass media industry. This extension is explained in terms of the then state’s ownership and stringent control of the mass media, similar to the colonial government’s case (Fraser & Estrada, 2001; Ochilo, 1993; Wanyande, 1995). It is typically argued that the ruling party continued with a fully state-controlled media system and was extremely reluctant to allow other mass media platforms to operate independently (Fraser & Estrada, 2001). In this regard, the state’s controlled media, which was run under the ministry of information and broadcasting at the time, was headed by a presidential appointee. These media platforms included the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), which started its life in 1928, and the Kenya News Agency (KNA), which was founded in 1963. These two are repeatedly mentioned in literature accounts as examples of the ruling party’s communication organs that were entirely controlled by the government (Ochilo, 1993). It is noted in these accounts that the traditional ruling party exercised control in the daily management of these media platforms mainly by influencing their editorial policies (Wanyande, 1995).

Within this area’s commentary, the ruling party is also understood to have extended its control to the privately-owned media, which in most cases took a critical approach towards it. It generally controlled this media in three main ways. First, it controlled it through public notices on threats of action in the courts of law. Such threats included the application of sedition and defamation laws such as libel and slander. It is interesting to note that the state had already instituted such laws to bolster its control of the privately-owned media (Ochilo, 1993; Wanyande, 1995).

Second, many commentators point out that the ruling party made good its threats by banning those media platforms that were in the habit of criticising its regime. They argue in this context that this was another way the government exercised its control. An example is given where the state used its legal authority to ban independent and critical publications such as ‘Beyond magazine’ in 1989, ‘Financial Review’ in 1989, ‘Development Agenda’ in 1989 and ‘Nairobi Law Monthly’ in 1990. Between 1988 and 1990, the reviewed commentary reveals that the state had banned about 20 publications (Ochilo, 1993; Oriare, 2008; Wanyande, 1995).

Third, it is argued concerning the government’s stricter control that the ruling party succeeded in controlling the privately-owned media with ease by making it possible for politicians loyal to it to own media platforms (Ochilo, 1993). It would be based on such ownership; therefore, that the government did not have to worry as the media in this category supported its policies in their entirety. One of the well-known examples given in this regard is a print medium formerly known as the ‘Kenya Times’, which was first published on April 5, 1983 (Wanyande, 1998).

In the same context, it is comport in the reviewed literature that some of the private investors that owned the media at the time, and who were not politicians, played it safe by ensuring that their media platforms avoided presenting...
specific stories that would easily elicit state's anger (Oriare et al., 2010). In ensuring that there was no collision with the current regime, it is noted as an example that such media, as directed by the government, avoided publishing several news items presented by the foreign media. The repudiation of these stories was necessary, at the time, given that the government was unhappy with the foreign media based on its conviction that such media were misinforming the world about the happenings in Kenya (Oriare, 2008).

In this discussion, it is important to note that the kind of media control we saw during the colonial regime gained momentum during this one-party state era. Indeed, the state’s immense control of the media sector during this era denotes that the then government was only interested in using the media as its mouthpiece. In this context, KBC is singled out as being more of a government’s mouthpiece than a public forum where citizens could air their views on issues of pressing concern (Oriare, 2008; Oriare et al., 2010). In this regard, commentators argue that this government’s suppression of the freedom of expression, in particular, brought about constraints in the media’s responsibilities. Such constraints were profound because it was challenging for individuals to participate in the media’s productive conversations on politics, policies, and institutional development. Based on this difficulty, many people remained passive actors on national affairs, an occurrence that made it easier for the ruling party to stem criticism and consolidate its political power (Oriare et al., 2010; Widner, 1992).

It is possible to recognize in this discussion that the state’s investments and efforts towards controlling, co-opting and intimidating the mass media succeeded. This success, as already established, impeded the media from executing its mandate in an unbiased manner. We saw that this partiality was in the form of the media working at the government's behest as its propaganda tool. Indeed, it is possible to see how this kind of partnership existed during the colonial period. The next discussion seeks to explore how such collaboration played out in Kenya’s most recent political dispensation.

2.3. The Contemporary Kenyan Media during the Multiparty Era 1992- Present

2.3.1. The Period of Multi-Party Rule

Several sources point out that due to mounting pressure against the one-party leadership system, Kenya, through its former President Daniel Moi's government, ended this leadership style in 1991. This ending is explained to have transpired after the first two former presidents; Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Moi had ruled the country under a single-party system for more than two decades. It is noted in the literature that by revoking the law that had permitted this style of governance, the era of the multi-party system finally became a reality. The realization of this system in Kenya became acknowledged by many as a positive step in the opening and pushing the democratic agenda forward in the country (Okete, 1998; Oriare, 2008).

A large body of literature galvanizes a consensus that the realization of the multiparty system in Kenya signaled a new dawn for the country's media sector too. This new dawn is typically referred to when talking about the positive change that generally swept across the country’s media landscape. One of the most notable factors repeatedly mentioned in this context is the liberalization of the media policies, which significantly led to the rise of two types of media organizations, private and community-based (Oriare, 2008; Wanyande, 1995). In more particular terms, it is demonstrated in several media discourses that the number of privately owned media organizations grew tremendously from the time the airwaves were liberalized in the 1990s. It is often explained explicitly that these privately owned media organizations were distinctly founded for-profit, given that their sustenance was in most cases determined by commercial revenue (Mitullah et al., 2015; Mbuba, 2015). This commercial venture can be seen, for example, in the form of the establishment of several newspapers in the country. Some of these newspapers, which are the largest in the country, include the standard, the daily nation, and the star. These newspapers are published by the standard media group, the nation media group, and the radio Africa group, in that respective order. These media groups are also known to be running, independently, many radio and television stations (Mulupi, 2012).

On its part, the rise of community-based media organisations was also attributed to the liberalization of the airwaves, which made it possible for a few individuals to take part in the structuring of its policy framework. These few individuals are known to have participated in the preparation of a draft section of a bill on community-based media that aimed at creating an enabling regulatory framework for the practice of community media (Rukaria, 2008). These individuals also participated in passing awareness about community media through the provision of training. They organised, in this regard, frequent meetings, seminars, conferences and workshops that focused on such training. Commentators explain that such individuals also played a role in making educational resources about community media available to all by producing and distributing such material (African Woman and Child Feature Service, 2013; Fairbairn & Rukaria, 2010; Gunucio, 2001).

Research that has sought to explore the increase in private and community-based mass media platforms after the liberalization of the mass media in Kenya demonstrate that such proliferation cut across all the domains, including print, television, and Frequency Modulated (FM) radio stations (Mitullah et al., 2015). Even though such research provides evidence of significant general growth in the number of print, television, and radio outlets, some are explicit in pointing out that the broadcast media has grown at a much faster pace than that of the print media. Such comparison is typically made on the media platforms at the mainstream level (Githaiga, 2011).

2.3.2. The Contemporary Moment

Accounts of the reviewed literature suggest that Kenya’s most current political dispensation, which is encapsulated within the multiparty democracy that was ushered in in the early 1990s continue to inspire the rapid
increase of media platforms in this localized context. The gains shown through such increase is attributable to several factors, one of which is the introduction of media freedom. Indeed, it is argued that from the time of the introduction of multiparty politics in Kenya, processes of making legislative changes to allow for the independence of the media followed. It is easy to recognize that some of these changes, which were explicitly and normatively structured to guarantee the media’s independence, were inexistence during the one-party rule. In this sense, the delegitimizing of media’s restrictions that were the norm during the one-party state’s era is understood to have primarily contributed to an increase in the emergence of media platforms in Kenya today (Wanyande, 1995).

Another factor that is thought to have brought about such an increase is the establishment of mechanisms designed to safeguard this newly acquired freedom of the media. Commentators argue that such mechanisms motivated media practitioners to establish several media-centric organisations as vehicles for lobbying and frustrating any attempts by the legislators to pass draconian laws that would give the state an undue control over the media (Oriare et al., 2010; Wanyande, 1995). Based on this claim, therefore, it would seem that such organisations’ role inspired confidence among individuals, which facilitated, in turn, the proliferation of media institutions across the country.

The other factor presumed in the literature to have directly contributed to the proliferation of media platforms during this contemporary moment is the potential media owners’ increased awareness about the media’s usefulness in the information democratisation process. Within this broader context of democratisation of information, it is argued that prospective media owners are becoming aware that the duty of making information accessible to everyone is one of those that the media can better handle. They recognise that the media can handle this duty well because of the country’s socio-political changes, which have increased people’s liberty to access information and express themselves through the media. In this regard, it is argued in various media discourses that the potential media owners now realise that individuals’ freedom to access information has increased the public demand for news and information. Based on this realisation, commentators posit that there is a rise in the establishment of media platforms to satisfy the public demand for information, particularly on ‘political matters’ (Oriare et al., 2010; Wanyande, 1995).

However, even though such gains in Kenya’s media sector are well documented, it is also possible to establish other areas where positive changes have not been realized fully. For example, reference is still made in the literature about the challenges media platforms face today in operating independently, devoid of external interference. An example is given of the KBC, which, as we saw earlier in this paper, is state-owned and controlled broadcaster whose independence was significantly compromised during the one-party state era (Mitullah et al., 2015). It is argued that this media platform remains marred with constant interference today from politicians and government officials, and it is for this reason that it continues to fail the impartiality test. It is assumed that the constant interference by the government officials is persistent because this broadcaster is heavily funded by the state (Mitullah et al., 2015).

It is also possible to recognize in the reviewed literature that other broadcasting tiers, other than the state-owned KBC, experience similar cases of interference by the state. It is pointed out that in this contemporary moment, similar to what was experienced during the one-party era, the state is still uncomfortable with the privately-owned media that is independent, bolder and vigilant. It is assumed that such media’s role in exposing some of the state’s scandals is the major contributor to such discomfort. An example is given in this context of one incident in 2006 where the government displayed its discomfort at one of the media houses that had uncovered one of its scandals by using the police to raid this media house – where it burnt its newspapers, destroyed property and confiscated its equipment. Indeed, this is one of the most unfortunate incidents that several media scholars continue to use as a point of reference in articulating various media-related challenges in Kenya (Oriare, 2008).

Another factor that has arguably continued to threaten the media’s independence is the market interest. Commentators explain that the Kenyan media industry is highly market-driven and as such, media platforms have to deal with the immense commercial pressure that, in some instances, tends to threaten their editorial independence. It is understood that their editorial independence is threatened mainly through their overreliance on advertisements. It is assumed that this overreliance occurs because it is one of the main ways media platforms generate revenue. In this case, it follows that media owners’ will inevitably invest more in securing and retaining advertising contracts for their media’s survival. In this regard, such investment may be construed that these owners struggle for such adverts is the trend because many of them hold market interests’ way above the independence of the media. For this reason, if the need arises, the owners will most likely interfere with their media’s editorial decisions just as a way of safeguarding the interests of their major advertisers (Oriare et al., 2010).

The literature also argues that the level of journalistic professionalism seems to be at its lowest in many media platforms today, which is another challenge the media industry continues to grapple with in this contemporary moment. There is a claim that one of the main reasons for such low levels of journalistic professionalism in several media institutions is financial problems. In this context, it is argued that financial problems make it difficult for media institutions to attract seasoned journalists, and for this reason, they have to rely on the services of the unreliable, untrained, and less experienced journalists (Githaiga, 2011; Oriare et al., 2010).

On the one hand, this discussion demonstrates the gains that have been realised in the media sector today and, on the other, threats and impediments that seek to reverse these gains. Throughout the discussion, it is possible to see how these obstacles resonate with those encountered during the colonial and the one-party state eras. In other words, these obstacles have remained consistent from the media’s establishment in Kenya to this contemporary moment. The next section highlights these obstacles as a way of summary and suggests proposals geared towards overcoming them.
3. Conclusion

This paper’s literature review demonstrates that the media industry in Kenya today is grappling with threats and impediments to its independence, which have existed since its inception during the colonial period. As we have already seen, these obstacles are in various forms of external interference through the state in their intimidation and control and market interests influence based on the need for advertisements’ revenue. Another challenge for the media that emerges in this paper’s review is the low levels of journalistic professionalism, which like the other two obstacles, has also remained consistent throughout the entire period of media’s existence in Kenya.

In light of these obstacles, it can be concluded that the future progress of the Kenyan media cannot be guaranteed if the current environment in which it operates remains the same. For this reason, the continued commitment of media practitioners and civil society organizations in agitating for the independence of media through the strict enforcement of the existing legislative framework will be needed to ensure this sector’s progress. There will be a need for these groups to lobby for an isolated strengthening of community-based media through legislation, as such media is not designed as a business enterprise. For this reason, its strengthening may, in this context, turn out to be useful in responding to the failings of the privately-owned commercial media. At the same time, it is of equal importance for these actors to lobby for the revision of the existing legislative framework to ensure that the media observe a high level of journalistic professionalism. It is proposed that such professionalism can be realized, in part, if media is barred from employing untrained journalists and that the trained ones are admonished to observe high standards of professionalism in their journalistic work.

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