

NOKIA
Hackathon 2012



Google+



KDFD KDFD



Networked News Lab

Kenya's tech community will not save journalism

New digital communication technologies, in the hands of creative and enterprising individuals, will help to make news media more plural and democratic. Or so the optimists would have us believe. But why is this not happening in Kenya, which is home to so many initiatives using the power of information and communication technologies to promote development? This briefing describes three reasons that the ICT4D community has so little influence on journalism in Kenya - and three ways that this can change.

1

Networked News Lab Briefing Note
January 2014

Photo: Windos app developer Lynnette Asudi working at Nairobi's iHub.

Kenya's reputation as a bastion of media freedom has been eroded of late. The divisive politics of the 2007 elections and the violence that erupted in the wake of that vote have sewn distrust in Kenyan newsrooms and complicated the job of journalism in innumerable ways.

As large media houses acquiesced to state-ordered broadcast restrictions during the post-electoral violence, bloggers and techies set up the crowd-sourcing platform Ushahidi to fill the information gap, and Kenya's new media scene has since remained at the fore.

Nairobi's tech community is now extending its ambitions to nearly all manner of social ill. While those ambitions have not included – at least not principally – a transformation of journalism, recent developments, including a media law expected to have a chilling effect on journalistic independence, have bolstered the sentiment that new media have a role to play in revitalizing the news industry.

There is not, however, a unified opinion on what that role should be.

Though views on the matter are quite diverse, one might separate them into two distinct camps. There are those who emphasize the antagonistic aspects of the relationship between old media and new; they can be called **the rebels**. The rebels look to new media to take on the responsibilities that old media cannot, or will not, fulfil. Rebels sometimes argue that mainstream media will be forced to improve as falling production costs and digital distribution networks enable activists to put added pressure on media houses and entrepreneurs to create new forms of competition. The founders of Ushahidi and Map Kibera are just two examples of Kenya's rebels.

The other camp, which can be termed **the collaborators**, places the emphasis on the more complementary relationships that have emerged between old media and new, spawning a variety of new journalistic specialties: crowd-sourced

Recommendations

How can ICT4D projects best support media development?

ICT4D projects can put more emphasis on narrative

ICT4D projects should have a clear idea of how their work fits within the wider media landscape. This may not mean that it should be their primary goal to influence mainstream media, but a well-founded critique of the practices and narratives of mainstream media will strengthen any strategy. Projects too should be judged by this comparison. Evaluations of ICT4D projects should not just look at how much content is produced, or other quantitative metrics, but on whether the content is qualitatively different - how they challenge popular discourse. Those projects that do aspire to change mainstream coverage must also strategize for the political challenges to achieving this.

Media rebels need greater support

These rebels cleverly use the support they receive in ways that were not originally intended. In that sense, almost any capacity building in journalistic techniques, including in the use of new communication technologies, can be a useful asset in the right hands. But they would also benefit from more support on their own terms, and less support constrained by particular development agendas. They benefit from being brought together; there are no forums or associations that unite them. Furthermore, there are few ways for them to connect with investors, or to get assistance with business models or locating investors. Media rebels also benefit from a greater clarity of vision and purpose, which the Networked News Lab has adopted as part of its mission.

Tech collaborators and media rebels might make the best team

Combining tech collaborators with media rebels has the potential to start a media movement, but success depends on finding the right people inside the media houses – a step too seldom taken. Tech collaborators can partner with the key editors and journalists who do have the ability to sway the agenda. They can make alliances (though this is always going to be difficult) with the initiatives – like the Trend and Africa Speaks – that already exist in media houses. They can build projects at the edge of mainstream media, where talented and committed journalists are seeking creative control to do good work. And they can fulfil, through purposeful action, the hopes placed in new media technologies to revitalize journalism.

journalism, citizen journalism, data journalism, etc. Collaborators prefer to work within newsrooms to integrate new communication tools into their work. In Kenya, collaborator-led projects include Al Jazeera's now defunct Sauti Project, which sought to cultivate a network of citizen journalists, and Code4Kenya, which attempted to build data-journalism desks in Nairobi newsrooms.

Neither the rebels nor collaborators are having an impact on mainstream media in the ways one might expect – and it is unlikely that they will. But there is a chance that rebels from inside Kenya's media industry, with support from tech collaborators, can reshape the news in Kenya.

Three reasons tech is failing journalism

1 ICT4D projects lack clarity on their purpose within the wider media landscape

There are many projects under the rubric of ICT4D that clearly have no need to interact with mainstream media. Yet for many ICT4D projects, where the ambition is to amplify citizen voices or to contribute to a more democratic public sphere, then it should be essential for the project to clearly understand its role vis-à-vis mainstream media – as a rebel, a collaborator or through some other function, as the case may be. Too often, however, ICT projects give no thought to this topic, and even if they do, only informally. As a result, their interaction with the media is often ad hoc or – worse – ambivalent.

The crowd-sourcing project, Uchaguzi (built on the Ushahidi platform) sought to coordinate and unify electoral monitoring efforts by several civil society organizations and citizens. Focused as the project was on collecting and communicating information to key electoral and security institutions, it did little to challenge media coverage of the event. Uchaguzi partners, for their part, also made a conscious decision to keep their spokespeople out of the press amid the extremely tense period when the country awaited results - a respectable choice, but one that could be viewed as at odds with the project's mission.

This is not to say that a stronger connection to mainstream media is always required – but that greater clarity could inform such choices.

2 Techies have little appreciation for the political challenges of journalism

Between the journalistic and tech communities in Kenya there is a chasm of misunderstanding and deep suspicions regarding each other's intentions. In the efforts made by the Networked News Lab to facilitate collaboration between ICT4D professionals and journalists, these encounters were often characterized by a degree of wariness on both sides. And while much is done to help journalists understand new communication technologies, little is done to educate the tech community on the nature of journalism in Kenya.

Members of the tech community fail to appreciate the political challenges of journalism in particular. When stories matter to those in power in Kenya, editorial processes are focused on managing the pressures exerted from outside and inside the newsroom. Kenyan news is a reflection of how editors and journalists manage these tensions, and that narrows the space available for journalists to determine which stories get told, and how.

This dynamic, viewed by an outsider, has created the impression that Kenyan journalists approach their jobs cynically. This is not true. Though these issues of power are often on journalists' minds, decisions are also driven by a concern for public interest and by journalistic norms – such as the imperative to seek truth, or the ethical obligation to do no harm. Furthermore, Kenya's media industry is not monolithic; it has its own community of rebels – who are doing what they can to reshape their industry.

3 Partnerships with media houses are dysfunctional

Dedicated media development organizations such as Internews Kenya that have committed years to cultivating strong relationships with editors and journalists are not afflicted by these issues, but for other organizations newly engaged in some form of media support, partnering with media houses can be problematic.

When development partners support media houses, it is often because they are hoping to use them as an “outlet” to transmit messages on health, governance, education or another topic. This practice has been criticized elsewhere, but a further drawback of this arrangement is that it can also compromise

the ability of participating journalists to use tech to reengineer journalism. In instances where a journalist might use the technology to carve greater journalistic independence in the narrowing space described above, the imposition of a development agenda can be an encumbering restriction.

Another mode used by the tech community to engage with journalists is driven by the idea of “mediated adoption,” now popular in the ICT4D field, which places an emphasis on local innovations and adaptations in the adoption of new technologies (as opposed to trying to import a model from elsewhere). This is exemplified in the many projects taking a “tell us how to use this technology” approach to media development. Strengthening journalism, however, is not a technical problem – not even a technical problem requiring mediated adoption – but a complex challenge where politics and creativity collide.

So what is reshaping journalism?

With or without support, “rebel” journalists are changing news media, from outside and from inside their media houses, and they are using new technology, in part, to do so.

On issues that affect citizens, like food prices and insecurity, Kenyan media have displayed a willingness to set the agenda, and to give some leeway to activists to shape the story. Activists such as Okiya Omtatah, Boniface Mwangi, and Dennis Nzioka are particularly effective at this, and made more effective (especially the latter two) by their use of new communication tools to rally supporters and tell their side of the story. These activists (one of which is a former journalist himself) also rely on the strong relationships they maintain with individuals inside media houses and benefit from their sophisticated understanding of the politics of journalism and the logic of the news genre.

Another change in the media landscape enabled by ICTs is the departure of journalists from major media houses in order to reclaim creative control over their work. Of course, many journalists also blog – and for a variety of reasons – but there are a plethora

of projects with loftier ambitions.

A few digital platforms have funding from donors or NGOs, like the ICC Kenya Monitor and Mavulture. Some ventures are commercial: on-line magazines that earn revenue from advertising or private media firms that produce a la carte content. Some journalists have set up websites that cater to the diaspora. A few journalists have plied their trade on their former employers as self-styled media watchdogs. And several websites are maintained by current and former journalists on a purely voluntary basis, often for the sheer pleasure of producing good work. The Sahan Journal is an excellent example of this.

Of course, these ventures do have a dark side as well. They can be the source of rumour and speculation that seeps into coverage. Political blogs often contribute, together with other forms of social media, to a climate of mistrust that stifles journalistic creativity.

On the other hand, innovative and insightful journalism also emerges from these on-line platforms that can inspire and inform what is done in the mainstream. When the ICC Kenya Monitor began to make extensive use of trial documents, the newspapers soon followed its example.

Within the media houses, journalists are using SMS and social media like Facebook and Twitter to gather information and opinions from citizens. In an environment where a hard-hitting journalist can be labelled a partisan, these sources are valued as a source of evidence. The falling cost of recording and transmitting technologies has also bolstered live and remote reporting in Kenya, drawing in perspectives that would have been lost before. The Occupy Parliament protest in 2013, for example, was the first demonstration to be aired on live television in Kenya - a fact that went almost completely unnoticed. We need to open our eyes to the wider panorama of Kenya’s media landscape.

Tech rebels and tech collaborators may not stand much chance of reinvigorating journalism, but tech collaborators and media rebels together just might. ●

Networked News Lab

The Networked News Lab brings together journalists, scholars, developers and other thought-leaders in Kenya to support research, dialogue and innovation in news media. Our Briefing Note series is intended to help communicate our knowledge and insight to a broad range of media stakeholders. www.networkednews.org