

JOURNALIST INTEGRITY AND INDEPENDENCE OF THE PRESS HOW I RELATE TO THESE ISSUES AS A JOURNALIST

By Fred Oluoch, Polical Analyst with *The East African*.

The East African is a regional weekly with its core market in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. It is published by the Nation Media Group (NMG), the largest Media House in East and Central Africa.

My job is to analyse major political events of the week, with a regional touch if possible. It is slightly difficult because:

1. Unlike political reporters, I am expected to analyse and bring out the story behind the story with the help of reliable sources.
2. Our paper comes out on Monday after most weekend publications have done their analysis. So to stay relevant, it means going deeper and deeper into the story.

What does integrity mean in my context?

In my view, it boils down to PROBITY. The ability to report fearlessly and without favour. That means the strength to write objectively about a topic you feel strongly about. This, however, must be supported by an editorial policy that allows one to write about any topic without any reservations.

But do journalists always maintain their integrity?

Yes and No. In my view, despite the training, journalists are shaped by society depending on the environment they operate in. How society perceives a journalist goes along way to influence the output, since society is the consumer of your product,

Two anecdotes that affected me in different ways:

1. The late Mulu Mutusya

An illiterate Kanu sycophant, who, in an attempt to please former president Moi after a series of media criticism, referred to journalists as the lowest of the low, who are CONCEIVED BY THE WAYSIDE. Whether he was always present at the conception of journalists is debatable. But what was initially seen as a very unfortunate statement from an illiterate politician galvanised the entire media fraternity to try and uphold their integrity. I, for instance, was determined more than ever to prove my integrity, no matter the circumstances of my conception.

On the other hand, it is not easy to keep one's integrity, given the environment we operate in. Political reporting in Kenya is a very dangerous exercise, since you have to know whose toes your are stepping on and what impact it might have on your life and your career.

This is because politics in Kenya is driven by ethnicity, money, personality and most powerful politicians only prefer favourable coverage. Anything else might lead to serious intimidation from politicians and their supporters depending on how sensitive the issue is. Unfortunately, the media has been sucked into this circle and it takes a very focused journalists not fall into this trap in their writing. The media is trying to break away from this vice, but it is not that easy due to a deeply ethnicised politics.

2. NDP/Kanu

In 2001 in the run-up to the later aborted merger between the then ruling party Kanu and the defunct National Development Party (NDP). Due to my inability to accept a merger that was going to strengthen the hand of Moi to suppress Kenyans further, I took to writing very unpalatable stories regarding the marriage of convenience.

One day while seated alone in a bar and sipping a cold beer after a very rough day, I realised that my neighbours (who happened to be Kanu supporters) were discussing my stories, cursing me and swearing to teach me a lesson. The good thing is that they didn't know how I looked. As far as I knew them, it could have been a very severe lesson indeed, since they were fanatics ready to die for their leaders.

The first temptation was to stand up and flee. But I later figured that I was likely to give my identity away. I also wanted to know more about how they perceived the media, especially the organisation I work for. So I just sat there until they ran out of steam.

While the incident did not interfere with my future objectivity, it made me think twice about the possible reactions of so-and-so's supporters before I embark on a story. Whether I maintained my integrity after such a scare, is for you to debate.

But the questions remain:

1. Does society demand too much from journalists, taking into account that we are all subjective beings?
2. Despite being an integral part of society, are we expected to turn the other cheek?

(B) Independence of the press

To me, it means the ability to report or write a story without looking over your shoulders, even if it is likely to antagonise certain interests, including your editor's. I will go directly into discussing how freedom of the press has evolved in Kenya through the reigns of three presidents Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel Moi and Mwai Kibaki.

The reason why I chose to focus on the three presidents is that press freedom or lack of it, has always been influenced by the president's personal style and the type of legislation they chose to put in place. But I will focus more on the Moi and Kibaki eras.

1. Media under Kenyatta (1963-1978)

The most important thing that shaped the media at this time, was that Kenyatta having been credited with bringing independence, was seen as a demi-god. Kenyatta was revered as the father of the nation, and the media was no exception. The media particularly hid behind the slogan that Kenya was a young nation and needed support from every quarter. The result was that the media let Kenyatta get away with murder, not literally, though.

Though there were isolated journalists who could write hard-hitting editorial against the government, especially in the event of the many political assassinations that took place during this period, the press was by and large, subdued. There were several cases when editors were ordered from State House to kill certain stories for the damage they could cause to the government in general, and Kenyatta in particular.

While there is not much to say about media development at this time, the media cut its teeth during this period, establishing their no-go areas.

2. Media under Moi (1978-2004)

This is the most interesting era in as far as growth of the media and freedom of press are concerned. It is also the period suffered most ranging from draconian laws, to harassment, arbitrary and detention of journalists, and to the disabling of printing presses.

But ironically, the Moi era also witnessed a significant increase media boldness, and investment in the media, especially in the late 1980s. Indeed, the media played one of the leading and crucial roles in the push for the re-introduction of political pluralism in Kenya in the early 1990s.

This trend was not only influenced by the growing public resistance against Moi's high-handed governing style, but also the clamour for multi-party democracy that was sweeping across Africa in the early 1990s. But while the well-developed print media had done more damage to the Moi regime, he preferred to keep broadcast media under tight government control for as long as it took.

Under pressure from bilateral and multi-lateral donors to allow greater freedom of the press amid harassment of journalists, the Moi government responded by issuing broadcast licences to only those who were perceived to be friends of Kanu. The result was that private broadcasters who were lucky to get licences resorted to self-censorship not to offend the establishment and lose their licences.

In twilight days of the Moi regime, he tried to curtail press freedom by amending the Books and Newspapers Act, in 2002. The Act requires publishers to purchase K1 million (6,900 Pounds) bond before publishing. The move scarred off a number of small publishers, especially in the magazine sector, who could not afford the bond.

One key development of the Moi regime was that it witnessed the phenomenal growth of the gutter press, that is normally engaged in patch-up work. They are popular with the ordinary public not only because of their affordability, but because they venture into areas the mainstream media does not dare touch, such as scandals about the private lives of politicians. They can write anything because they don't have to worry about advertisers, shareholders and powerful politicians that the mainstream media do. The government is frustrated by the gutter press because the publishers are not easy to trace. They have no fixed address, as they move from place to place to avoid arrest.

Still the ordinary citizens who either cannot afford mainstream newspapers or who feel that the mainstream media is not bringing out the entire truth about politicians, are very faithful to them.

What did it mean to be a political writer during Moi's rule?

Those were exciting days, at the same time very dangerous. I found it easier to get classified information from the State House then rather than now, the reason being that the Moi administration was divided into camps, each leaking information about the other. As a result, the press managed to expose a number of corrupt deals and anti-people schemes, some of which were abandoned after media exposure.

For instance in late 2001, I got wind that close associates of Moi were pressurising him to hold on to power contrary to the constitutional requirements. I went to town with the story after thorough investigation and although Moi personally denied that he intended to hang on to power, other papers and politicians picked it up, making life quite difficult for him.

3. Media under Kibaki (From 2002 to the present)

The Media under Kibaki is much freer compared to the first two presidents. But it is still debatable whether the Kibaki government is keen on greater freedom of the press, or the government simply came at a time when the press had tasted blood. While the current government came to power promising enhance democracy, human rights and freedom of the press. The irony is that the Kibaki government is not in a hurry to repeal the draconian legislation put in place by Kanu.

The media regulatory framework that allows for the abuse and manipulation of the media, especially the licencing of broadcast frequencies, is still in place. The government has even seen it fit to use the once forgotten Criminal Libel to harass journalists. Quite a number of broadcast and print journalists from the mainstream media have found themselves in court for rubbing some powerful cabinet ministers the wrong way. There is also a pending Media Bill in parliament, through which the government seek to regulate what they call as reckless and irresponsible journalism. The good thing is that their media has never been freer and has learnt to fight back fearlessly with total public support.

Currently, the biggest threat to freedom of the press, are the media owners who would like to influence the news content to favour their political friends or business interests.

As a political writer, you sometimes come across editors who have close links with powerful politicians, and once in a while, you find your story being killed. Not because of the quality, but the likely damage it might inflict on the editor's politician friend.