

# Will Newsrooms Continue to Be Relevant? Reflections on the Practices of Journalism in Kenya during Covid-19 Crisis

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**Abstract:** Journalists were quick to adopt to the new world order imposed by the Corona Virus crisis in 2019-2020, and resorted to use of technology, and working from home. While the technology has always been improving, and it was available to journalist, and while journalists and media managers in Kenya considered the fact that the world was moving to technology and they devised new ways of reaching their audiences on digital platforms, there is very little evidence that they were willing to improve the way they work with technology and continued to cramp in newsrooms. The Covid-19 crisis has therefore, woken them to the reality of the importance of technology and working from home, which has made newsrooms completely irrelevant, as journalists easily worked from the comfort of their homes, came up live for radio and TV from anywhere and exchanged material with colleague and editors without physical contact. This paper looks at the future of journalism in the wake of Covid-19, and technology explosion, in comparison with traditional media, it examines the literature surrounding use of available technology and seeks to identify challenges to switching to digital in Kenya.

**Keywords:** Journalism, technology, newsroom

## I. INTRODUCTION

The current COVID-19 pandemic, originating in Wuhan, China, is just one in a series of pandemics that have characterized the epidemiological history of humanity over the centuries. HIV/AIDS is one of the pandemic that spread all over the world and peaked between 2005 and 2012 period, and which is estimated to have killed 36 million people so far; the 1968 influenza pandemic that killed one million people; the Asian influenza of 1956-58 that killed two million; the cholera pandemic of 1910-11 that killed 800,000; and the 1918-20 influenza pandemic (also known as the Spanish flu) that affected more than one-third of the world and decimated an estimated 20–50 million people.

The media industry has undergone significant change in the last few years but in 2020, with the all-encompassing global impact of COVID-19, the pace of change is being accelerated by fundamental shifts in how we live, work and understand the world.

Enduring life in lockdown for both the journalists and the audiences will no doubt accelerate the shift from newsroom-based traditional media to digital media. (Need to quote) Yet, while 41% of journalists agree social media algorithms will change the way they work, the relevance of artificial

intelligence and machine learning appears to be impacting journalists in Kenya significantly less in terms of practicality. Tech is helping journalists to shape their readers— to understand who’s reading stories, what types of content their interested in, what times of day particular stories are gaining traction etc. – but the need critically look at how to modify themselves to fit into these categories remains to be explored.

Newsrooms worldwide are under intense financial, physical and psychological pressure during this pandemic, just like in many other sectors, the coronavirus pandemic has also had a great impact on the media. In a time when professionals from different occupations are trying to manage work from home, correspondents, who usually spend a significant part of their time on the field, running after stories and people, and the whole media sector, in general, find themselves face-to-face with new challenges. Fighting an increase in fake news, managing work remotely, and the traditional media's adaptation of a new digital model will be among the many tests the sector will have to go through.

The media sector will have to adapt to survive. Technology will play a bigger part in the sector as digital media gains power. Yet, digitalization surely will bring along new challenges and problems with it. For instance, as social media takes place of conventional media, the problem of fake news will be more obvious than ever, but the journalists, who could be the backbone of challenging the fake news in the new media platforms, continue to lag behind in terms of its usage.

After this period of confinement ends, just as in many other sectors, it is inevitable that traditional media will have to reflect to either adopt to the new digital world, or perish for good.

In a Post-Covid-19 world, media and communications scholars will no doubt be competing to make sense of the excessive mediation around the virus and its effects, and will no doubt produce studies after studies on different aspects of the coverage of the crisis if only because, whether we like it or not, technologies will continue to be as ubiquitous as during this moment of global crisis, if not more. While admittedly, students of media need to be wary of the rather un-nuanced technological determinism that underpin simplistic and uncritical understandings of McLuhan’s “medium is the message”, who gets to use technologies and under which

conditions, who circulates messages and what intentions they have remain serious questions to be asked by critical media scholarship.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The concepts of the “reflective practitioner” and “reflective practice” come from the philosopher Donald Schön (1931-2007), specifically his influential *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983). The work of Schön provides a foundational framework for this article. The concept of the “reflective practitioner” has been widely embraced by educators in journalism

Journalism informs. It educates. And that’s important because, from my perspective, there’s nothing scarier than an uninformed populace, a group of people who can’t make good decisions or think enriching thoughts because they’re ignorant about what’s going on in the world. As the written word shapes the individual, culture leaves its handprint on every monumental experience and trivial moment.

A critical lived reflective competence seems to be a problem for journalism. Ethnographic studies mention that journalists in newsrooms experience a gap between the wish for increased self-reflection and its actual practice (Buijs 2014; de Haan 2012). Additionally, both newsroom research and outcries of journalists in popular media show significant resistance against reflection as being “too academic”, rational, or just too time-consuming (Buijs 2014; de Haan 2012; Groenhart 2013).

This paper is inspired by the concept of the “reflective practitioner” (Schön 1983), a fundamental concept embraced by journalism educators (Deuze 2006; Sheridan Burns 2013). Here we explore the meaning of reflection in relation to pervasive theories about journalistic practices, ethics and journalism as a social system (Shoemaker & Reese 1996, 2014). We do not stop at recognizing that reflection as deliberate conscious behavior is under pressure in the reality of journalistic work but seek to push the possibilities of coming up with learning practices within the practices of contemporary news production

As a result, this reflections not only on look at the literature of journalism practice and on the experience of journalism practitioners during this pandemic, but also on the experience of the author as a journalist for 14 years, a teacher of journalism at Moi University.

The Internet has had a great impact on how people view the methods and purpose of journalism, as well as people’s perceptions of news media. The shifting balance of power between journalism and its [audience], and the rise of a more self-conscious and better educated audience (both as producers and consumers of content)” has indelibly altered the landscape of journalism.

### *My personal experience in the field*

I have been working as practicing journalist for over 14 years; first as a field reporter, where I have been travelling around to gather news. Then I worked as a monitoring journalist, where I used to scan the media coverage and behavior, comparing their coverage of certain sensitive issues, and looking at their objectivity and professionalism. From 2011, I worked as a team leader and head of a department for a reputable international media organization. Now I am media and communication consultant and part-time lecturer. I have lived with journalism from all its angles, and know its practices. As a journalist, I have been looking at the transformation of the media industry, from traditional to heavily digital, from monopoly to citizen journalism and social media. I have watched audience’s behavior changing and switching to mobile, and so were majority of media institutions; trying to adopt their content to mobile. However, the media fraternity in Kenya refused to let go of its old practices; the expensive and specious newsrooms, the big studios, the long and tiring editorial meeting and the desktop-based shifts. This has made the Kenyan media, in my view, play a catch up quite a lot of times and repeating what people already know from social media and other informal sources. The Kenyan media has particularly been notorious for falling into the agendas that are set by others; mostly the government and other key players. Therefore, the Covid-19 has made journalists discover that, with the technology, they can work from anywhere, provided they have good internet network, any place can be a studio. With the shutdown, finding content has also been impossible, other than Corona Virus related news. This is now the right time for journalists to pose and ask the question, what we can learn from this Covid-19 experience to improve journalism.

On the other hand, discussions around the viability of the newsroom have been ongoing, but albeit, focusing on its structural, and not the functionality aspect of it. What the covid19 pandemic has done therefore, is to speed up the experiment on the functional aspect. As a consequence, we are likely to seem the emergence and perhaps the acceptance of the virtual newsroom, and this could as well mark the beginning of the death of the newsroom as we know it today.

### *Newsroom evolution since 1980s*

Journalism is profoundly affected by a changing media environment that has contributed to an ever-increasing pace of innovation and a differentiation of media channels and platforms that simultaneously follows and fosters individualized media use. The digitalization of news media has enabled changes in news production as well as in news consumption, both on the level of individual practices and of organizational and social structures (Kormelink 2015). In particular, social media have enlarged and multiplied the possibilities for public participation in journalism: Terms such as participatory journalism (Singer et al. 2011) have been used to characterize how these trends affect the relationship between journalists and their audience and the way we look at

journalism as whole, and the demands we place on them. Since the 1990s the major challenges confronting journalism – and research into it – has been seen in the developments around the internet and the new communicative conditions that came with it (for an overview see Mitchelstein and Boczkowski 2009). This illustrates that the work of journalists and journalism is increasingly inter-twined with the ever changing media environment, which affects how journalism is produced, distributed and used by audiences (for a historical perspective see Birkner 2012).

Today, journalistic contents are produced, used and distributed via range of platforms, and social media increasingly complement traditional mass media by giving them more options to be able to interact with their audiences. One consequence is an increased connectivity between journalists and audiences as well as an omnipresence of audience feedback: News organizations must now manage an increasing amount of audience-led comments, for instance, social media channels create an avenue for interaction. This has the potential to change how today’s journalists and their audiences look at, use and control these kinds of interactions (Bergström and Wadbring 2015). The increase in the participation of audiences in the content has been witnessed in the past few years. What we are presently observing is a shift in the understanding of the comment section from being “a space for a new ‘deliberative democratic potential’ to emerge” (Collins and Nerlich 2015) to a necessary evil or even a threat to deliberation.

#### *Procedural Literacy*

As computer technology grows in established economies, Kenya continues to delay in the implementation process and that widens the already huge digital and knowledge divides (Ford, 2007). Nonetheless, presently, several initiatives are ongoing in Kenya to embrace e-learning technologies in higher education sector numerous challenges notwithstanding. A research conducted by Tarus (2011) one of the universities in Kenya established that insufficient ICT and e-learning infrastructure were among the major impediments hindering the adoption of e-learning in Kenyan public universities.

Several academic institutions are quickly adopting ICTs. This has been essential in clearing the way for the provision of internet services to university community members. Jones and Madden (2002:23–28) argues that the internet has unearth new academic opportunities for students. Firstly, online groups excel on the internet. These study groups provide learns with an opportunity to discuss class work with even though they may be living kilometers apart, submitting assignments, conversing with lecturers and maintain contact easily. Despite previous studies showing students in Kenya are huge consumers of the internet, it is barely used to further their academic or educational goals as pronounced

In the information technology age. Example given is a study by Wambilyanga (2002:39) which established that the youth in Nairobi did not prefer the internet as an academic hub and

Kwanya (2005:36) Established that majority of the students who took part in the study did not visit Websites for academic reasons. Jones and Madden (2002:23) agree with the findings and add that it is not surprising for university students to use the internet more as a medium for social communication and not for their studies. Another millstone that has been advanced by tertiary institutions' adoption of ICTs is the provision of electronic resources or digital resources (e-resources). Academic libraries, and especially university libraries, subscribe to these materials as additional resources to their print resources. It is heart breaking to note that e-resources are not adequately utilized. In a study on college students’ use of the internet in the library, Jones and Madden (2002) found that the majority of students’ time was not spent on utilizing e-resources. Students did state that they used the internet for web browsing and e-mail. There could be many reasons why students do not use internet for academic purpose, but the major reason could as well be lack of skills or know-how to use internet resources (Luambano & Nawe 2004:13–17). In reference to these authors, insufficient knowledge of internet resources that could improve learning and students’ lack of motivation because lecturers do not emphasize on the use internet resources It is thus evident and disappointing to note that although there are increased efforts by universities to provide internet services and e-resources to students, few students use them to further their academic goals. This leads to a lot of concern to university management. It also a matter of concern to those who are involved in designing e-learning Websites and other internet based resources. For journalism students at this time, who are supposed to come out well versed with digital platforms, this is a major set-back, as they usually graduate, looking forward to working in newsroom, and with the quick changes in technology, which may result in introduction of virtual newsrooms, this generation of journalists risk losing out in the job market, unless they adopt to the use of technology, that is quickly taking shape, being accelerated by Covid-19.

#### *New Skills needed*

The pandemic has resulted in what is effectively the largest “work from home” experiment ever conducted in the history of the human beings. However, we are sure of one thing, there will be significant changes in the way companies operate and work, which includes the media. With the technology advances, the media world was set to change rapidly, but the pandemic accelerated it. There will no longer be stable work environment, and any journalist, who is willing to succeed in a post Covi-19 world will have to be able to adapt to the changing workplaces and have the ability to continuously update and refresh their skills.

One of the best ways to prepare for a post Covid-19 is to acquire technology skills. The COVID-19 pandemic is fast-tracking digital transformations in the media industry in Kenya, who in my view, were trying hard to maintain status quo, and were not in any way breaking new barriers in terms of technological world; playing catch-up in most of the time.

The reality is that technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and use of robotics will make businesses more resilient to future pandemics, and media companies need to look at this. For media industry, audio and visual capabilities of mobile phones, and the use of these applications will be a key indicator in whether a journalist has the right skills or not, and whether can use minimum space and cost to produce content and disseminate.

Journalists also need to change their tone, to appeal to an increasingly social media generation, to be less serious and more informal talk. According to a Reuters Commissioned report by Lucas Galan, Jordan Osserman, Tim Parker and Matt Taylor, “in general, the tone of news items can at times feel overly serious, institutional, dry, and technical for younger people....This audience responds better to more human approaches, stories, touches of informality, honest opinions (real people).”

#### *Battle for existence*

During this Covid-19 crisis, journalists are mostly operating outside newsrooms using their laptops and mobile phones. But as the number of Covid-19 cases continues to rise in Kenya and in the world, questions are being asked about the need for big newsrooms to keep producing content at the expected rate and standard, and also the safety of mobile journalists should be taken into consideration.

Having access to accurate information can mean the difference between life and death during a crisis. That's why right now, journalists around the globe are working around the clock to make sure people in their communities are informed as the COVID-19 virus ricochets through our countries, our towns, and our families.

It's especially in times of crisis like this that collaboration is needed. There are so many reasons why collaboration makes sense for journalism right now: We can better support each other, avoid duplication, diversify our coverage, amplify each other's work and expand our own reach.

Reporting aside, the lockdown is also having an adverse economic impact on news media outlets.

Many of the media houses are trying hard to go to 'digital-only' versions of their newspapers and magazines, which is likely to kill whatever little income that was generated from advertisements. Mobile phones and the internet have become necessary tools for their reporting.

The Covid-19 pandemic is posing a serious challenge to the media industry globally and in Kenya specifically.

The sudden sharp shock to the global economy led to an immediate collapse in advertising revenue that most news organizations are dependent on to stay in business.

As well as job losses, journalists have had their pay cuts or been temporarily laid off, while some publications have already ceased publication.

Kenyan journalists, just like the rest of the work force across the globe, have seen a disruption and impact that the novel Coronavirus has brought to the lives of many professional. All media houses in Kenya have either temporarily effected pay cuts or suspend certain benefits for a period of time. For Kenyan media companies, the business has dropped as advertisers face a dilemma of how to keep their staff employed, pay bills, and still be in business when this all ends.

Nation Media Group, announced temporary pay cuts for its employees as Covid-19 crisis in Kenya continues to squeeze revenues and joined other media houses that had already announced the pay-cuts. Royal Media Services (RMS) management announced a general salary reduction for all its staff as a result of negative effects of Covid-19 outbreak in Kenya with all the workers subjected to a compulsory pay cut of between 20 percent and 30 percent.

Radio Africa Group took the same approach and announced general pay cuts for its employees to cushion itself against the adverse effects of the pandemic. The media house, which runs a number of radio stations including Class 105 and The Star newspaper, announced a 30 percent pay cut for all employees earning a gross salary of more than Sh100, 000 and 20 percent for salaries below Sh100, 000.

Standard Group had issued a notice to lay off 170 employees which they attributed the imminent job losses on the need to realign organizational structure, automation, as well as a shift in consumption trends of media material that has had a negative impact on the company's ability to attract revenue

#### *Way forward*

Future journalists will be more willing to work for agile boat-like structures, operated by a small and dedicated crew. Staffers will have to be multi-talented and will master a vast palette of tools like data-driven storytelling, video production, infographics, and a deep proficiency in social media.

The need for a more aggressive stance against misinformation everything from approximation to blatant fake news appears more essential than ever as we address the uncertainties of the pandemic. Many have been shocked by the recklessness of some journalists always ready to jump on juicy stories without any distance or even research.

It has been more than 10 years since Thomson Reuters announced for the first time that it would use algorithms to produce financial news stories in less than 0.3 seconds after receiving the data (Momus, 2006). The trend of automated articles is moving faster than ever before. Just tell the software the topic you want and you will have it written within seconds with less errors than human journalists. The advancements made in jobs regarding robot technologies and artificial intelligence will change the very nature of the work, itself. Some will be lost, some will increase, and others will be entirely new creations (Watry, 2016). Technological developments have always assisted journalists in the

newsroom by making journalistic labor more cost-effective and cheaper. By the same stroke, however, it reduces the staff. Technologizing the workplace could force journalists to do more work in less time as well

It is not hard to imagine that human journalists will be replaced by software in the near future. In fact, this transition exists already. Editors have been replaced by software editing programs. Stories will be increasingly generated by robot journalists in the near future. Maybe production is all about the volume of articles these days. But in the future the focus will be more on the richness of the content produced by the joint effort of both the data resulting from algorithmic journalism and a yet necessary human finishing touch.

The Oxford University and the Reuters Institute pay attention in their annual report of predictions 2019 to the example of the Chinese mobile platform Toutiao (Jinri Toutiao), which works with algorithms that generate personalized news adjusted to the interests of more than 120m users with average dwell times of over an hour each day. “Now these AI driven apps are spreading across Asia with Newsdog one of the most popular aggregators in India and Toutiao’s owners, Bytedance, investing in similar apps in Indonesia” (Newman, 2019: 32). This could be where Kenyan media owners, and media practitioners are supposed to be up against in terms of competition, instead of competing with themselves, otherwise, they will wake up when the whole world has moved on, and due to the globalization, their population would also move with the trends in the globe.

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