

STOP PRESS: The cost of too many 'small sacrifices' on East African media freedom

Times change and with them, the ways in which we think about media freedom and editorial independence. In early part of the 1990s, the struggle to end military dictatorships and what had always been (or had become) one-party states was being waged across Africa. Central to that struggle was the struggle for an independent and pluralistic media. There were many aspects to the meaning of 'independent' and 'pluralistic' as concerns the media.

In Kenya, as elsewhere, 'independent' meant freedom from ruling party and state (at the time, synonymous) control over the media. Some independent print media houses existed – think here of Hilary Ngweni's *the Weekly Review* and, later, Gitobu Imanyara's *the Nairobi Law Monthly*. They provided a platform for those critical of the excesses of the dictatorship of the Kenya African National Union (KANU). They persisted – as did the privately-owned daily newspapers like the *Nation*, the *Standard* and, later, the *People* – despite attempts to bring them down that included not only the more obvious arrests and laying of criminal charges of sedition (or defamation or libel) against their journalists. But also, more crudely, the raids on and destruction of their property. And, more subtly, the threats of removal of their sources of revenue – including the then most important source of state advertising.

It's slippery slope. Times change. The impulse to silence dissent, however, never does. Just the ways in which that impulse is realised

Broadcasting, however, remained in the hands of the state (read the ruling party). What were meant to be 'public'

broadcasters—like the *Kenya Broadcasting Corporation* (KBC) then the *Voice of Kenya* (VOK) – did serve up educational and entertainment programmes. The KBC probably, as a result, now has the biggest archive of Kenya’s musical traditions as well as its early musical pioneers. But its political programming reflected the poor understanding of ‘public’. It was, in effect, a party/state mouthpiece. With licensing denied to any and all attempts at private broadcasting until the Kenya Television Network finally broke through.

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The agitation for media freedom and editorial independence thus included demands for the removal of criminal charges of sedition. Protests at the ever-skyrocketing payments awarded by a then-compliant judiciary for defamation and libel to the party/state figures of the time. Attempts to build a more diverse advertising base. And demands to open up the airwaves.

But there was awareness, even then, of the dangers of a media landscape dominated by private owners – and of the dangers of equally monopolising cross-media ownership. Hence the demand not only for ‘independent’ media ownership – meaning, at the time, independence from the party/state. But also for ‘pluralistic’ media ownership – meaning a genuinely ‘public’ broadcaster and better regulation of the same, regulation too on cross-media ownership as well as allowances for genuine ‘community’ broadcasters (not understood then in ethnic terms).

Fast forward to the present. The ‘public’ broadcaster is largely irrelevant in terms of audience share. We have private broadcasters. With few exceptions, ownership of the private broadcasting scene is dominated by key political figures and

families. We have community broadcasters. With equally few exceptions, what presents as being 'community' broadcasters are really private broadcasters that operate in local languages – not media produced by, for and on behalf of the communities they serve.

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As for the print media, it is not that obvious and crude attempts at controlling their content no longer exist (think the Artur brothers). 'Brown envelope' journalists are common. As are 'brown envelope' editors who decide to run, slant or spike stories depending on their paymaster of the day. But 'brown envelope' journalists and editors, who do it for money, are not the worst of the lot. The worst of the lot are the journalists and editors who believe in and propound the political (and ethnic) divisions of the day.

Then there are the managers and owners. Or those who act on their behalf. Some of whom, no doubt, genuinely believe the political pressures they are subjected to on this or that sometimes require 'small' sacrifices. If a Tanzanian President is so outraged by a political cartoon that sales of one of their outlets are not allowed for months on end, it may be considered that the departure of that particular cartoonist is just such a 'small' sacrifice – necessary to keep the whole ship on track. Ditto if a Ugandan President is so outraged by a particular editor that their operations and licensing are all at risk – it may then be considered necessarily expedient to remove that editor from all of those Ugandan operations. Another 'small' sacrifice for the greater good.

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We may not agree with those 'business' decisions. We may understand that, in the minds of some of the managers and owners, a delicate balance is being maintained. But we also understand that after one 'small' sacrifice is made, a second one becomes easier. The demands and political pressures for such 'small' sacrifices only increase with capitulation—they don't go away. A weakness is sensed—and all political operators are like carnivores that have caught the scent. Once they have, they move in for the kill.

The weakness is also sensed internally. The political operators know- by the successes they have – who supports them in this sort of assault internally. Who is doing this not reluctantly but because they are believers. Not in their mission as members of the journalistic profession. But in their mission to advance their political (ethnic) cause.

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Therein lies the danger. Not only that the 'small' sacrifices demanded are usually of the best of us, the most excellent—so that it is truly critical thinking that ends up seeing the door. Not only that 'small' sacrifices slowly become big ones. But that the media houses themselves become sites of political struggle internally – rather than playing, to the best of their ability, their role as more than recorders of events, as more than analysts of events, but also their role as defenders of the very rights on which their existence is founded,

predicated. Betraying their audiences. Betraying too the compact upon which they seek revenues from and based on those audiences.

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