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TECHNOLOGY DISRUPTION IN KENYA:

Challenges Facing Local Newsrooms

by Doreen Wainainah

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Introduction

Digital disruption is a term the media has used time and again to describe the invasion of technology in industry, changing how businesses operate.

A decade ago in Kenya, when mobile money arrived, the banking industry was sceptical about how it would work and if at all there would be any adoption. It was a new technology that changed how banking was done with M-Pesa leading the way in the field.

Banks and businesses have integrated the service into their systems to lure customers and retain existing ones.

The digital era is taking no hostages in industries in Kenya with the media industry currently in the middle of the adoption stages of online media and journalism.

The media has been making changes in the structure, investment and overall way of doing business to the delivery of news.

According to Emily Bell and Taylor Owen at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism there is a rapid takeover of traditional publishers' roles by companies including Facebook, Snapchat, Google, and Twitter that shows no sign of slowing¹.

The main players in Kenya's landscape including the Nation Media Group, The Standard Group, Royal Media Services and Mediamax Networks, are all multimedia outfits hosting different products in print and electronic media as well as a digital presence.

The impact has been felt with the firms downsizing as well as changing the structures and how they operate.

News has to become cheaper to produce, and cost reduction must be accompanied by a restructuring of organizational models and processes.²

As the business strategy evolves, the newsroom has had to morph how it operates to produce content for the new space in which it operates as well as cater for the print.

The internet is only going to have an ever bigger impact on the media in Kenya.

¹ <https://towcenter.org/research/the-platform-press-how-silicon-valley-reengineered-journalism/>

² <https://towcenter.org/research/post-industrial-journalism-adapting-to-the-present-2/>

Statistics from the Communication Authority of Kenya indicate that in the first quarter for the financial year 2017/2018, the total number of internet subscriptions stood at 30.89 million subscriptions in Kenya. This was a 4.3 per cent increase from the previous quarter.

Mobile data/ internet subscriptions made up 99 per cent of this figure, an indicator of the devices used to access the internet in Kenya.

As the number of users and viewers on online platforms grows, the devices used will continue to play a role in the content providers. It is estimated that more than 50 per cent of mobile devices are feature phone. Of the smartphones, low cost devices dominate the segment.

The newsroom and online teams must take this fact into consideration as they create and churn out content for users in the market.

In the 2017 edition of the State of the Internet in Kenya, Whatsapp has an estimated monthly active user base of 12 million, Facebook at 7.1 million, Youtube at 8 million, Intagram 4 million, linkedin and twitter at 1 million each while snapchat at 0.25 million.

These social networking sites have been a crucial platform for sourcing of news and connecting with the readers for journalists.

The increased online activity has also promoted the growth of blogs in various segments in the Kenya. The State of Blogging report in 2015 had estimated that there were over 15,000 registered blogs in Kenya with 3000 being active blogs registered by Kenyans on Tumblr, Blogger and Wordpress.³

In the 2017 Social Media Awards in Kenya, over 10,000 blogs put in applications for nominations in the various categories. These sites offer targeted content for readers, allowing them even more control over what they want to read and in what format or language, posing a direct challenge to the newsroom.

Blogs have enjoyed a continued show of growth in Kenya and according to their findings, the lifestyle category recorded the highest growth of 69 per cent followed by business 46 per cent and creative writing 36 per cent.⁴

The Nation Media Group has begun the implementation of a new business strategy to be a digital first company.⁵

³ The State of Blogging & Social Media In Kenya 2015 report

⁴ The State of the Internet in Kenya 2017

⁵ Nation Media Group Annual Financial Report 2016

This paper takes an in depth look at the strategies currently being employed by the Nation Media Group in its print products and the lessons that can be borrowed by global media houses that have undergone and are still going through the evolution from print to online.

Present media landscape

Newspapers in Kenya are one of the most important disseminators of information to the public.

Dating back to late 1890s and early 1900s, the concept of Kenya's first surviving newspaper was born under the name The African Standard.

The first paper was published in 1902 under the paper, which, over the past century underwent ownership and name changes including The East African Standard to its current identity The Standard.

The industry that was initially a monopoly became a competitive platform with the entry of a Swahili weekly dubbed Taifa. This was bought by the Aga Khan and converted to a daily paper under the name Taifa Leo. A year later, in 1960, the Daily Nation, an English version of the Taifa Leo hit the streets under the Nation Media Group.

The Nation Media grew its circulation and within a decade, it had sold over 46,000 copies.⁶ This prompted the investment by the media house to invest in a printing press that could produce colour copy in 1970.

Since then, the print market saw multiple players making entry including the government backed Kenya Times, started by journalist Hilary Ng'weno, as Nairobi Times. The publication ceased publication more than 25 years later.

The changing landscape of the print segment as well as the cost of producing national dailies has seen four private media houses dominating the newspaper market.

Nation Media Group, the Standard Group, Radio Africa and Mediamax Networks publish eight print newspapers with a larger number of online publications,

The Nation Media Group added to its two dailies, Nation, Taifa (and their Sunday counterparts), the East African and the Business Daily. The group also publishes Mwanaspoti, a Swahili sports newspaper through its Tanzania Subsidiary, Mwananchi Communications for sale in both countries.

The Nation Media initially published Taifa Leo, a Swahili national paper, and the Nation before venturing into specialised newspapers. The Business Daily, a purely business publication and The

⁶ www.nationmedia.com

East African, a regional weekly paper, complement the national papers with specialised content on financial markets as well as business news and the east African region respectively.

The Standard Media Group produces the Standard, a daily publication and its Sunday counterpart as well as a tabloid content newspaper by the title Nairobiian.

The People Daily now under the Mediamax Networks was started by Kenyan businessman Kenneth Matiba as a weekly paper names The People before it was converted into a daily.

The other most notable publication, The Star is published by the Radio Africa Group with the key focus of its content being the political landscape.

Until 2013, Kenyan newsrooms were reaping profits from the growing circulation and growing advertising. The publications were growing in readership, circulation and profits were an upward trajectory. But the good times ended with the spread of the internet across the country, when it became easier to access news that would previously have only been available in print.

According to the Kenya Bureau of Statistics Economic Survey 2017, there has been a declining trend in the year on year readership of both English and Swahili newspapers since 2013.

“The number of Kiswahili daily and weekly newspapers in circulation decreased by 15.5 per cent and 22.6 per cent, respectively, in 2016. The daily and weekly English newspapers in circulation declined by 4.2 per cent and 8.2 per cent, respectively, during the review period.”⁷

The online segment has however experienced the opposite with a steady increase in the number of daily visitors. The Economic Survey 2017 further states that the average online newspaper readers increasing by 18.3 per cent to 1,862,943 in 2016.

The Nation Media states that it receives 60 million monthly page views on its platforms⁸, an indicator of the existing demand for news articles on alternative platforms from the traditional hard copy.

But this has not stopped the group investing in print.

The Nation Media Group gone live with new websites and a dedicated online team.

But it has also invested in a new Sh2 billion printing press to give it flexibility in its regional coverage.

⁷ Kenya National Bureau of Statistics Economic Survey 2017

⁸ Nationmedia.com

“The new press has enabled us to increase our region-specific newspaper editions to six, to ensure that we deliver according to our consumers’ priority issues,” said Joe Muganda, Nation Media Group Chief Executive Officer.⁹

The publication employs an edition model for its circulation where it tailors news to the different localities of its readers. “We realise that great debates are triggered nationally, in the villages and regionally hence the need to ensure we pass information to people the way they naturally consume it,” said Mr Muganda.¹⁰

The investment by the Nation Media Group in a new printing press, the introduction of a new print publication by the Standard Group (Nairobi) as well as the move by Mediamax to offer its newspaper for free to readers, indicates that the market may still have an appetite for print.

Churchill Otieno, Editor, Online and New Content, at the Nation Group said Kenyans still have an appetite for the physical newspaper. “Print may reduce in size gradually, but doomsday claims of death are exaggerated for now. Indeed, NMG just invested Ksh2bn last year in a new printing press. As top whether local newsrooms are prepared, its import to note that a fair amount is still generated in the same newsrooms that serve print.”

Catherine Gicheru, Country Lead, Code for Kenya, Knight International Journalism Fellowship, International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ) states that print is not on its deathbed even though there are many — not necessarily journalists— who are calling for the interment of the newspaper as we know it.

Indeed it is not just the Nation Group investing in print. In 2014, South Africa’s Times Media Group bought a stake in Radio Africa Group which owns the Star, a political newspaper, with intentions of employing a fully digital strategy for the publication.¹¹

Mediamax Network Ltd opted to go with a free physical and e-paper model to grow circulation. Newspapers have perhaps been the biggest victims of new changes as they seek to remain relevant in an age where immediacy, instantaneity and simultaneity have become key ideals in an information and networked society.¹²

⁹ Nation Media Group Annual Financial Report 2016

¹⁰ <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/-Nation--launches-Nyanza-edition/1056-3352306-12gw5hw/index.html>

¹¹ https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2014/04/14/radio-africa-sells-49-to-south-africas-times-media_c925208

¹² The impact of digital technologies and the internet on media and journalism in Kenya, Media Council of Kenya

What is the future landscape going to look like

But even with this investment in print, it is clear that newsrooms need to refocus.

“What we will invest in in the future is a moving target. As digital disruption continues to touch every sphere of life, human communication habits also shift. The two things we will keep investing in are ways of tracking these shifts and capability to adjust our story formats in tandem with these shifts,” said Churchill Otieno.

The future of the newsroom is not one that is static nor is it clear. When the Financial Times and the Guardian, both UK based publications, began the transformation to an online two decades ago, social media was not the phenomenon it is now.

Mobile was still in the early stages of being a key point of access and the iPad and iPhone were not yet to hit the markets.

This, was not something the ‘futureproof’ digital plan had considered as the challenge did not exist. Even with the uncertainty on the evolution of tech trends globally, the media must come up with strategies that will align with the growth plan.

Media organisations in Kenya are grappling with the reorganisation of the newsroom, story formats and operation modes are taking the steps towards a digital first approach.

The explosion of mobile that gave rise to innovations such as M-Pesa have seen the growth of use of mobile in Kenya, and in turn, the consumption of the bulk of the IT based product on mobile.

Alan Rusbridger, chairman of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and former editor of The Guardian said that to succeed digitally, the newsroom must decide whether it is an online publication with a newspaper or a newspaper with an online presence.

This step is crucial as it will directly impact the structure of the newsroom, flow of content as well as the deadlines associated with publishing.

The choice to be digital first is one that news organisations need to make consciously. I argue that many newsrooms in Kenya have not yet gone far enough in the way they think about digital news.

Currently, newsrooms in Kenya, mainly operate to press deadlines. There is little sense that the online reader needs more regular updates. On the occasions stories are updated frequently online, the articles often offer just a sneak peek of what will be offered in greater length in the print versions, as the full articles are published after the newspaper hits the streets.

Articles slated for print the following day will either be uploaded late in the evening with the top stories making their online debut at the same time as the early morning paper sales. Without paywalls or a profitable online revenue models, the newsroom is still monetising on newspaper sales before offering part of its content online at no premium to the readers.

Many newsrooms including the Financial Times have had to totally rethink their approach to stories to ride the wave of digitalization. As at April this year, the Financial Times reported an all time high in its circulation of 850,000 digital and print subscriptions. Of these, 650,000 were on the digital platform, more than three quarters of the total paying audience.¹³

Hugh Carnegy, Financial Times Executive News Editor, said the paper has around 900,000 paid subscriptions and print only makes up approximately 220,000 of the total.

The publication still has a team that handles the production of the newspaper, but this is a massively reduced role. The printed edition was thought to be more significant than the digital side, but just over a decade ago, this thinking was turned on its head. The Financial Times reorganized its newsroom to become digital first.

This meant a change in the roles, structure, reporting hierarchy, content, deadlines and all the processes that were involved in churning out the newspaper.

Modern digital newsrooms have adopted some of the routines and practices of legacy media such as the daily news conference and using a journalist's professional skills and sense of newsworthiness to prioritise stories. Where the routines and practices differ for digital-only newsrooms is the use of data analytics to track audience receptiveness to stories.¹⁴

The news selection process in turn means first priority on online content published with print getting 'second dibs' on all content.

This deliberate decision to make online the key resource for news dissemination, feeding readers with news content throughout the day.

Further, digital editorial staff have a broader range of skills and can work on multiple platforms compared to their predecessors. They not only gather, prepare and present news in textual, audio

¹³ <https://aboutus.ft.com/en-gb/announcements/financial-times-2016-annual-results/>

¹⁴ http://arts.unimelb.edu.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0003/2517726/20913_FNReport_Sept2017_Web-Final.pdf

and video formats, but they provide headlines and thumbnails on their stories and pay close attention to how their stories are followed on social media.²

Steps to surviving the digital onslaught: what are we doing versus what more do we need to do

The Kenyan reader has become more discerning of the content provided, and the demand for round the clock updates to breaking and trending news as they happen.

As a result the Nation Media Group has decided to adopt a digital first model¹⁵ that integrates the use of various online and mobile platforms to deliver news to the reader as it happens.

According to Alexa traffic ranks, three of the top sites visited by Kenyan are news sites.¹⁶ In addition to this, the social media pages of the media companies, either the print or TV rank in the top ten Facebook, Twitter and Youtube pages respectively.¹⁷

The change has meant reporters must alter the way they work.

The basics of telling a story do not change despite the environment or platform that is used to relay the information. However, that said, there are additional skills that the news process requires to get news on the various platforms. The new 'super reporter' needs to have the multiple platforms in mind for every story that they intend to cover.

A journalist now needs the ability to think and write online across mediums and platforms, some technical skills including data management from data extraction, analysis to visualisation, enterprise journalism (reporting that is not generated by news or press releases but from sources). Editors also need the skills to not only manage diverse teams of reporters, but also be able to lead these teams in the production of in depth, investigative, data driven and multimedia content.

Ms. Gicheru pointed out that in many newsrooms, only senior executives were aware of just what a digital first strategy involved. The journalists are often unaware of their role lack the skills to take advantage of the new technologies. Even as they embrace a digital first strategy, many of the newsrooms have not adapted their newsroom structures or workflow systems to reflect this.

¹⁵ http://www.nationmedia.com/investor_news/nmg-embarks-on-implementing-a-new-strategic-direction/

¹⁶ <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/KE>

¹⁷ <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/kenya/>

Convergence has been a pivot in the newsroom of the future for the Nation Media Group. Having multiple publications, both on print and electronic media as well as television and radio, the Group in 2016 announced it would be converging its desks for increased efficiency.

The merger of the business desk for its TV station, business paper and general business news desk into one under the Business Daily was one such move. This meant that all print, online and tv processes would be under a single desk, with reporters working for both online and print.

A Media Council report showed that while these converged newsrooms allowed journalists to work together, share ideas and the diary, stories and work for various products and platforms, they also created internal pressures for journalists that some contend conflict with traditional principles of journalism, including specialisation.¹⁸

Their research further indicated that more than half of the journalists in the top four media houses were required to write for more than one medium.

The strategy of having writers who can work in more than one platform is not one that is unique to Kenyan media as other publications have employed similar strategies. The Financial Times has journalists and editors that work on both the print and online versions of the publication.

In the Financial Times case however, there is no competition between print and online as both have their respective paying subscription base.

Kenya is a much younger market for online, and the Nation Media Group is yet to effect paywalls for its online publication, meaning that the online readership does tend to cannibalise the print revenue, which is still the backbone of the organisation.

Nation Media Group relaunched its publication Business Daily with a new look website and newspaper that were to integrate more data stories and visualisations for the readers.

The Group's digital products Newsplex and My Network were awarded at the Digital Media Africa Awards in December 2017 for best data visualisation and best innovation to engage youth audiences respectively.¹⁹

¹⁸ The impact of digital technologies and the internet on media and journalism in Kenya, Media Council of Kenya

¹⁹ <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Nation-Media-Group-shines-at-Africa-digital-media-awards/1056-4227090-yys8isz/index.html>

The Nation first went online in 1997, with the site receiving several face lifts over the years to grow its audience base. On a group wide level, Nation Media states that it receives about 103 million visits monthly.

This is a key indicator in the consumption of news. The web is playing an integral role in news, and the content that is presented there must be subject to the same rigorous checks and design that a newspaper article is subject to.

Collaboration between hacks and hackers, slang for journalists and coders, is essential for the products.

Data analysts and programmers need to have their spots in the newsrooms, working alongside the journalists provide the essential data and provide the tools needed to get stories out.

Data journalists and analysts have been brought into the 'fold' allowing them to work as a part of the newsroom. The coders, who create the tools needed for journalist to better visualise and work in the digital newsroom, are yet to have their space in the heart of the newsroom despite the integral role they play in the modern newsroom.

"There is definitely room for hackers to work alongside journalists in the newsroom. They can help journalists in the research, analysis and visualisation as well as applying technology to bear on some of the mundane and routine jobs in a news generation processes. Building interactives and providing audiences with personalised content among other tasks. Hackers can help newsrooms not only connect better with audiences but can mine this and other data which can then be leveraged for the benefit of the newsroom," said Ms Gicheru.

The continued loss of experienced journalists in the newsroom is posing a challenge on the quality of content. The constant restructuring of newsrooms has seen more experienced scribes exiting the newsroom, and in their place, younger tech savvy recruits coming in.

Many journalists working in major media houses have lost their jobs as a result of digitisation. This is especially if they cannot fit the new environment given the obscurity of their skills, or their inability to adapt or acquire new ones. The loss of jobs is also a consequence of the proliferation of media houses that has put pressure on the revenue base of the organisations as a consequence of fragmentation and reduction of audiences.²⁰

²⁰ The impact of digital technologies and the internet on media and journalism in Kenya, Media Council of Kenya

Nation Media had taken an in house training approach to equip their new employees with the skill set it needed in the newsroom. “I can see young people coming through to learn the ropes of journalism. And as an organisation we will spare no expense to give the very best training,” said Mr Muganda in 2016 while launching the seventh edition of the MediaLab in 2016.

The gap however is in the retraining of existing staff to keep up with the industry demands as well as the job demands.

Ms. Gicheru states that there is a need for the newsroom of the future to invest in people and empower them with the right kind of skills to be able to take advantage of the opportunities that the digital technologies provide.

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