



Journalist Fellowship Paper

How Kenya's media retooled peer review to address issues of trust and quality in news

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Introduction

The media in Kenya has faced tough questions around recurrent errors and a lack of diligence in reporting. No media house is immune to these challenges: a cursory review of the four main newspapers (*Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, *People Daily* and *The Star*), major TV stations (Citizen, Kenya Television Network News, NTV and K24) and several radio stations will reveal examples of news content that fails to pass basic journalistic integrity tests.

Open biases, factual and grammatical mistakes, and sometimes poor judgement on the part of reporters and editors have had one major consequence: eroding audience trust. Along with diminished trust, these errors have sometimes left media houses bruised by hefty defamation costs and a loss of brand equity.



Senior journalists, including this paper's author second from right, during an editorial planning meeting at The Standard newsroom in Nairobi, Kenya.

In an era where technology has unsettled the status quo of how news is gathered, edited and distributed, getting our news-gathering process both professionally and ethically right is important for several reasons. One, it is the differentiation between what we offer and what citizen journalists on social media can deliver. Two, high

quality content is a signal to our audiences of how seriously we take the obligation to serve the public interest with avidity and clarity of thought. Three, low standards can amount to misinformation or disinformation.

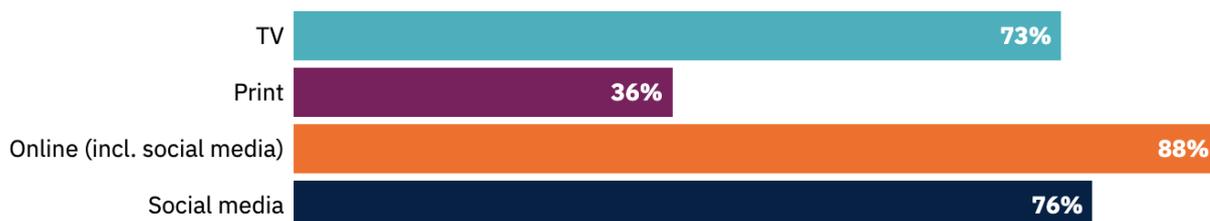
Of course, none of this is unique to Kenya. What is unique to Kenya is our response to this crisis: setting aside the boundaries of competition, the country's biggest media houses and mediums have decided to work together, using a voluntary peer review model, to hold each other to account.

This paper explores how Kenyan media reached its crisis point, and what the peer review process entails and how it was implemented. Finally, we will examine a few other measures we've taken to improve quality and consider whether the Kenyan model can be duplicated in other regions.

A catalogue of errors

While freedom of the press is not a guarantee in Kenya, there's consensus that the country boasts one of the most vibrant media landscapes in Eastern Africa.¹ For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to consider some of the errors that have been made in recent years – not as judgement, but to set the scene for the solutions we have trialled in Kenya, and which we describe later in this paper.

It is also helpful to consider these errors in the context of a time of immense change for print, TV and radio news: all challenged by the digital revolution. According to the Digital News Report, 88% of Kenyans go online for the news with 62% saying they use Facebook for this purpose.



Graph from Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2021 shows Kenyan media use

This is corroborated by the findings of the Kenyan Social Media Landscape report by SIMElab, which found that a third of the 88.5% of Kenyans on Facebook are using it for news.²

¹ Mwita, C., 2020. The Kenya Media Assessment 2021. [online] Internews.org. Available at: <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/2021-03/KMARReport_Final_20210325.pdf> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

² United States International University-Africa. 2020. The Kenyan Social Media Landscape: Trends and Emerging Narratives, 2020. [online] Available at: <https://www.usiu.ac.ke/assets/image/Kenya_Social_Media_Landscape_Report_2020.pdf> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

In print

In a country of 52 million people known for delicate ethnic relations, the audience has become increasingly jittery about the way newspapers report political stories.

In 2007, more than 1,200 Kenyans died in politically-instigated violence blamed on poll-rigging and insensitive reporting by media houses that took sides along political camps of then-President Mwai Kibaki and his challenger Raila Odinga.

Among the charges against Kenyan journalists, they have been called out for an over-reliance on unnamed sources, sometimes unhelpfully described to the audience as allies of whatever political camp they are sympathetic to. Kenya's Deputy President William Ruto has complained about this repeatedly, saying political sources are described in the news as "Ruto allies" even when they speak in their individual capacities.



An August 14, 2019 tweet by Kenya's Deputy President William Ruto protesting the 'overuse' of "Ruto allies" in headlines. According to him, news subjects should be identified by their names.

The Standard, on November 8, 2019, had to retract a juicy front page scoop implying that Kenyan opposition leader Raila Odinga's luxury car had been impounded by the Kenya Revenue Authority over import duty tax evasion. Headlined "*Raila's Range Rover among those seized in KRA tax probe*", the body of the story contradicted itself saying, "It is not clear if the car is owned by Raila or is among a pool of cars that supporters often provide for his use during campaigns."

On February 11, 2021, *The Star* manufactured quotes in a [story](#) about firearms licenses.³ Its retraction and apology read: "The story quoted former chairman of the gun owners association Anthony Wahome calling for digitisation of the process. We have since learnt Wahome did not utter the words quoted in the story. We take this opportunity to retract the story and apologise to him for the embarrassment caused."

In broadcast

Broadcast media has had its own share of mishaps. In socially conservative Kenya, TV and radio users can complain to the Communications Authority of Kenya when they find content offensive. Kenya's more than 100 vernacular radio stations are most frequently cited by the authority for foul language. But larger morning radio programmes such as Maina Kageni's show on Classic FM and Radio Jambo's 'Patanisho' are also often the subject of complaint.

In March 2021, three presenters at Homeboyz Radio Lift-Off morning show were fired after discussing on air whether a woman pushed from a 12th-floor window after refusing the sexual advances of her date was to blame for agreeing to meet a man she didn't know. "Do you think Kenyan chiles [women] are too available, are they too

³ Ombati, C., 2021. Firearm holders protest delayed renewal of licences. [online] *The Star*. Available at: <<https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2021-02-03-firearm-holders-protest-delayed-renewal-of-licences/>> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

loose, too willing, too desperate and that's why they get themselves caught up in such situations," radio presenter Shaffie Weru asked listeners.⁴

On television, in April 2020, viewers were stunned when [Citizen TV](#) carried a weeklong daily apology to neighbouring Tanzanian President John Magufuli (now deceased) for using “inappropriate words” to describe his COVID-19 relief efforts in a news bulletin.⁵ (The word in question was “defiance”.)

This year, the Kenya Television Network News (KTN News) broke the news of the death of an ex-presidential aide but ran photos and clips of another aide who was very much alive. KTN News apologised on April 4, 2021, both on air and its social media accounts. The excitement of having been the first with the story quickly metamorphosed into embarrassment.



← **Tweet**



KTN News @KTNNewsKE · Apr 4



CORRECTION: While breaking the news of the death of former State House Comptroller Abraham Kiptanui on KTN News, we erroneously used the photo of Joshua Kulei, a former Moi aide. We apologise to Mr. Kulei and his family for the mix-up.



⁴ BBC News. 2021. Kenyan DJs sacked after blaming woman for being pushed off building. [online] Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-56555495>> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-2yHaP7Glg> [Accessed 15 May 2021].

Peer review for journalism

To turn the tide on these embarrassing mistakes and diminishing audience trust levels, Kenyan journalists decided to work together to improve quality. There's consensus among many Kenyan editors that collaboration holds the key to addressing trust concerns.

Members of key newsrooms and broadcasters worked together with the Media Council to create [The Media Observer](#), based on principles of peer review, to hold each other to account and discourage sensationalism and polarisation.

Peer review as a formal industry practice first began in 1731 among doctors, as an idea of the [Royal Society of Edinburgh](#), which published a set of peer-reviewed medical articles. [Medical News Today](#) describes peer review as “a quality control measure for medical research”. It is a process in which professionals review each other's work to make sure that it is “accurate, relevant, and significant”.

In Kenya, senior journalists do the same, in a sober and non-partisan way – away from the rush of deadlines and competition between media houses.

When I spoke with journalist fellows at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism about how Kenyan media uses peer review among journalists, they were skeptical, saying that under normal circumstances this would not work in their countries.

Polish journalist Jakub Krupa asked, “How does that even work?” while Brazilian Journalist Adele Santelli said: “It's amazing that journalists can work together in

improving quality and restoring trust in the media. In Brazil, it might be tricky due to big egos and the clashing interests of journalists.”

The reason peer review works in Kenya, is because of our shared belief that the long-term interest of the profession overrides the immediate commercial or personal pursuits of journalists and their media houses. It’s typical of the Kenyan “*harambee*” spirit (directly translated as pulling together) or the “*ubuntu*” philosophy of Southern Africa that propounds: “I am because we are”.

How it works

Each week, a group of 10 volunteers – all veterans of various Kenyan media organisations – comb through the last six days of print, radio and television news to see if it conforms to the Media Council of Kenya’s [Code of Conduct](#) for the Practice of Journalism, and other basic quality standards.⁶

They weigh up any public reaction and then – with the benefit of hindsight – either commend or call out reporters and editors for their work in a newsletter titled the [Media Observer](#).



The mast head of the Media Observer, a publication that critiques media content in Kenya and often carries reviews from seasoned journalists as well as readers giving feedback on stories.

⁶ 2013. Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya. [online] Available at: <<https://mediacouncil.or.ke/sites/default/files/regulations/Code%20of%20Conduct%20for%20the%20Practice%20of%20Journalism%20-%20Media%20Council%20Act%202013.pdf>> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

This process is carried out with the blessing of the Media Council of Kenya, but is essentially a self-regulation model that is independent of state control. While not controlled by them, the Media Observer augments the work of official government regulators.⁷

Each edition of the Media Observer is shared with media houses, trainers and professional societies. It is available online for all interested parties, including the civil society and free speech lobby groups.

Victor Bwire, one of the pioneers of the initiative, said: "From the feedback we have been getting, it has been a major tool of accountability, engagement and feedback. It is an effective tool of engaging that's helped in addressing [past] ethical mishaps."

Gathenya Njaramba, who was a consulting editor at the Media Observer, said: "It's an important platform that brings different perspectives to the work journalists and editors do. It sustains the journalism profession by allowing media industry veterans to guide younger journalists on the ethos and ethics of the practice."

Jerry Abuga, who helped lay the foundation for the peer review model, says the Media Observer has two tenets. "It acts as a point of reference for best practices in journalism and two, the fact that it is authored by professionals in the industry makes it a practical tool for sharing valued journalistic experiences and guidance."

The publication has been used as reference material in the training in various accredited journalism colleges in Kenya. Abuga, who is the Media Council communications officer, adds: "Looking at it from a professional viewpoint, its conception was based on the code of conduct of the practice of journalism in Kenya,

⁷ Apart from the Media Council of Kenya, other agencies that deal with content regulation in one way or another include the [Kenya Film Classification Board](#) and the [Communications Authority](#).

a schedule in the Media Council Act 2013. The code has 25 clauses and every edition of the Media Observer attempts to revolve around them.”

I asked a cross-section of Kenyan journalists how they felt about the Media Observer. Linda Akwabi, a senior sub-editor, says she consults Media Observer because she believes journalists are better placed to ensure the practice does not plunge into a dark moment due to errors and diminishing trust. “There’s too much information churned out by unverified sources,” she said.

Freelance journalist Ray Jumah said collaboration would help media houses deal with cross-cutting challenges of fake news and waning trust. “Media houses need one another in these trying times,” he said.

Copy editor Godfrey Ombogo of *The Standard* said the industry needed to learn what has worked and what has failed in informal and formal regulation. “Journalists are human and sometimes they err,” he said. “Peer review helps to point out mistakes that journalists can learn from. When it comes to making it better, all journalists have a stake. This is why journalists across competing media houses should combine forces in addressing the waning trust.”

Key feedback provided

One of the most frequent criticisms levelled to the media by the *Observer* has been its constant reminders to editors to be careful with their choice of opinion articles. It is vital to clearly differentiate news from opinion, but opinions should also be based on facts.⁸

⁸ 2013. Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya. [online] Available at: <<https://mediacouncil.or.ke/sites/default/files/regulations/Code%20of%20Conduct%20%20for%20the%20Practice%20of%20Journalism%20-%20Media%20Council%20Act%202013.pdf>> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

Some of the media reviews are so critical, they can border on professional rebuke: there have been several harsh words for radio stations seen to be spreading misinformation on important topics, including on reproductive health, human rights, investment and security.

MEDIA REVIEW

Dala FM fanning misinformation in the name of herbal cures

When did it become Okay for radios to advertise everything under the sun, even ushenzi?

For many months now, Dala FM in Kisumu has been advertising — no, actively promoting — so-called alternative medicine. Eti herbs. Only it's not medicine or herbs. It's plain uganga. Sorcery. Witchcraft. Daktari kutoka Tanzania nonsense.



By Friday, same times, the audience was informed about free treatment on Sundays, or Sh1,200 consulting fee on other days.

On Saturday, same evening session, the station hosted Mama Zawadi, yet another “doctor” at Katito junction, Daima Complex, Door No. 1.

The “doctor’s” specialties? Love, work issues and kisirani, the station said.

An editorial calls out radio for misinformation

Editors have not been spared by the *Media Observer* either, with frequent admonishments for failures to bear the weight of responsibility for errors, instead of blaming reporters and copy editors for bad decisions and taking the glory when things go well.

MEDIA REVIEWS

Apologies: When editors throw their reporters under the bus

The cliché has appeared countless times in news reports in recent days. ODM threw Migori Governor Okoth Obado under the bus, asking MCAs to impeach him after he was charged with corruption.

The Kensa board hurled Health CS Mutahi Kagwe under

The Des Moines Register

SATURDAY, JUNE 16, 2018 8 THE NEWS ON A DEVELOPMENT & DESIGN REGISTER.COM PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Iowa to **NO APOLOGY**

A review challenges editors to readily accept responsibility when they err

The Media Observer acts as a major tool in the fight against fake news. Each edition provides the audience with numbers to call and emails to use to alert the Media Council of any news items that are deemed fake or misleading online.

FAKE CONTENT ACROSS THE INTERNET

The following fake incidences were debunked during the week. Beware of fake content on the internet and the media in general! **Report serious incidences to 0800 720 529.**



An image shared on Twitter purporting to be the cover page of The Star newspaper and dated June 5-7, 2020, is fake.

The headline of the fabricated weekend

A Facebook post claiming that Citizen TV journalist Linus Kaikai went missing after interviewing Kenya's Deputy President William Ruto is fake. The claim, which was posted on Facebook on April 16, 2021, states that the journalist was last seen around Nairobi's Karen estate minutes after midnight. The post further claims that Kaikai's wife, Jacinta Mueni, reported the matter to Kilimani police station. Kaikai had a one-on-one live interview with Ruto on April 15, 2021. Eight days after his interview, he showed up on News Gang. He also appeared on another edition of News Gang on April 29, 2021. Further, the journalist attended the Media Council of Kenya World Press Freedom Day celebrations on May 3. Moreover, there have been no official reports of Kaikai's alleged disappearance, which would have received wide media coverage given his prominence.



The Media Observer debunks fake news and encourages the public to report suspected cases.

The fake news challenge in Kenya peaks during elections, and it can be on an enormous scale: on April 13, 2017, voters in Busia, Kenya, bought the day's edition of the *Daily Nation* without realising that the front page had been replaced overnight by cartels to include a [fake story](#) that a frontrunner in a gubernatorial election had defected to a nondescript party. The candidate in question lost his race.



Some of the alerts raised by media houses warning readers to beware of fake news in circulation.

The *Observer* also makes it possible for reporters to get feedback from their colleagues on their work: and it's not all negative, as a January 27, 2021 [review](#) of *Daily Nation* reporter Paul Wafula's finance reporting shows.⁹

The ease with which The Media Observer offers feedback is crucial. In journalism, feedback is a key ingredient that helps in assessing the impact of a story. Without feedback, as Harold Lasswell's model shows, communicators don't know how effective or ineffective a piece of communication is.¹⁰ Feedback, whether positive or negative, readily helps editors with decision making and allows for further audience studies to help fashion content in a manner that can drive sales and reach.

Merits of peer review

To quote politician and lawyer Frank A. Clark, "Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man's growth without destroying the roots." This is the spirit of peer assessment, where the goal is not to vilify but to improve quality.

The key merits of peer review, as applied to the Kenyan journalism, are these:

- It promotes a culture of collective responsibility and encourages a healthy debate around media content by both journalists and the public.
- Collective reflection on professionalism provides an opportunity for the younger members of our trade to learn from the wisdom and counsel (or, indeed, the mistakes) of veterans.
- It encourages journalists to develop critical thinking skills, which in turn can help us to know our own strengths and weaknesses.

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<https://mediaobserver.co.ke/index.php/2020/12/14/nation-reporter-deservers-award-for-watchdog-journalism-in-finance/> [Accessed 15 May 2021].

¹⁰ Smith, Bruce Lannes, Harold D. Lasswell, and Ralph D. Casey. *Propaganda, Communication, and Public Opinion : A Comprehensive Reference Guide*. Princeton, New Jersey, 1946. Princeton Legacy Library. Web.

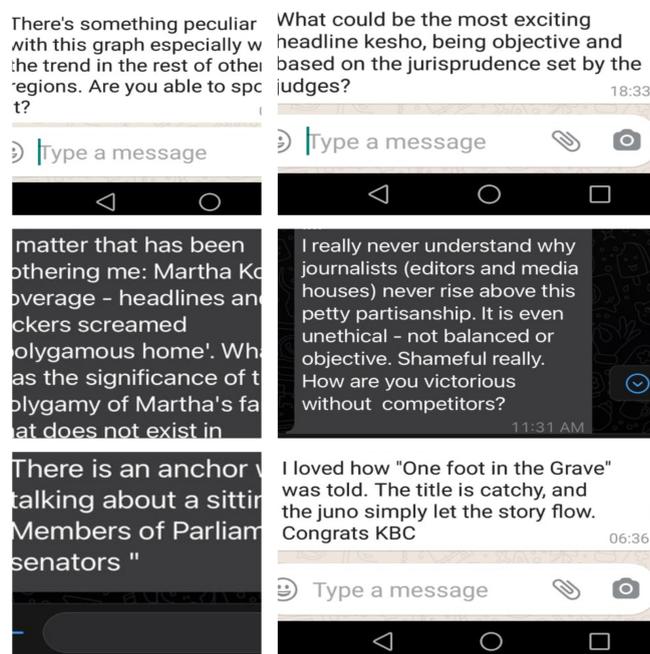
- It adds a second layer of accountability to know your work may be reviewed by ‘hawk-eyed’ senior peers in the profession, and not just your own editors.
- It encourages journalists and editors to reflect on their work, take responsibility, and is a reminder to act in the public interest.
- It can act as a helpful summary of feedback from both colleagues and the audience.
- It inculcates a feeling of belonging, where journalists across media houses view themselves as part of one big professional family and not just “us versus them”.
- It can alert media houses to gaps in their own internal quality controls.

Other measures for quality

The *Media Observer's* peer review newsletter does not sit in isolation as the only measure being taken by Kenyan journalists to improve quality.

The Kenya Editors Guild holds monthly [town hall meetings](#) where media performance is discussed and the public is invited to air their views on whether the media is fulfilling its watchdog role.¹¹ It also holds an annual convention where editors meet to discuss emerging industry issues, and organises events where various speakers are invited to give their views and interact with editors.

Kenyan media stakeholders also maintain a cordial working relationship on WhatsApp, as the small sampling of screen-captured messages (taken with permission) below show.



Screengrabs from WhatsApp conversations between journalists (shared with permission)

¹¹ Available at: <<https://www.kenyaeditorsguild.org/events-programmes/town-hall-meetings/>> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

In various WhatsApp groups bringing together journalists from across the media landscape, journalists not only critique their handling of content but also exchange views on various issues, including the day's big stories.

Three groups of which I am a member (Media Stakeholders Forum, Media Watch and News Desk) are fertile grounds for peer review. After the newspapers go to press every evening, PDF copies of the front pages find their way into the groups and reactions fly in.

The groups are also used to generate story ideas and journalists use them to seek each other's opinions on issues. WhatsApp groups have also been used to flag fake news doing the rounds on social media. Increasingly, this platform is being used to share press statements and share contacts of news sources.

Finally, there is a weekly podcast discussing various issues in the media. Hosted by seasoned editors Clay Muganda and Julie Masiga, the [2M](#) podcast discusses various topical issues and has become a popular peer review platform. One of the recent episodes was titled: "Media madness and the Kenyan culture of blame game".¹²

¹² <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2NKgKRUV8s9XvINNGzhSyB>

Making peer review work for you

Self regulation through peer review is a system whereby journalists hold each other accountable for the quality and accuracy of their content. If the Kenyan experience is anything to go by, this measure can provide an additional layer of scrutiny – additional to a state ombudsman or media houses’ internal quality controls – that is both quick and less prone to political interference.

Having edited the the Media Observer and contributed several reviews (see [“Why media should hold truth and objectivity in poll coverage”](#)¹³ and [“Adrenalin-hit Kenyan media fights to be first with the story”](#)),¹⁴ I offer the following seven measures to take to ensure your own peer review programme is an effective tool in the fight to restore audience trust.

Guard goodwill

Suggestions for improvement made in the *Media Observer* remain just that: suggestions. There’s no formal mechanism for ensuring media houses take note of our findings. The process relies entirely on goodwill, and the desire of reporters and editors to improve.

Therefore, this system only works if newsrooms – and particularly those leading the newsrooms – remain vocal in their support and motivation to improve standards. Put briefly: ensure the goodwill of the collective is maintained.

¹³ Oloo, M., 2021. Why media should hold truth and objectivity in polls coverage. [online] p47. Available at: <https://internewske.org/files/media_observer.pdf> [Accessed 19 July 2021].

¹⁴ Oloo, M., 2021. Adrenalin-hit Kenyan media fights to be first with the story. [online] p25. Available at: <https://issuu.com/mediacouncilkenya/docs/media_observer_magazine_october-dec> [Accessed 19 July 2021].

Make it part of a routine

There's a danger that the value of honest critique may be lost in the daily rush to meet deadlines and get new stories and exclusives for the next bulletin or print edition. Ensure someone on your team has time set aside for reviewing peer critique and audience feedback – particularly on social media. Summarise constructive feedback and allow journalists to respond directly when needed.

Consider hiring a public editor

According to *Toronto Star's* former public editor [Kathy English](#), the revival of public editor's role in newsrooms can restore trust in news and improve the diversity of content and newsroom staff.¹⁵

The idea behind this role is to have a dedicated staff member tasked with the implementation and enforcement of the media house's professed journalistic ethics. The public editor also acts as a link between the newsroom and its audience by ensuring audience concerns are well taken care of by the newsroom. If public editors from different media houses were further able to combine forces through peer review, imagine how our media landscape would change.

Regularly review editorial policies

The internal editorial policies of media houses must evolve to meet the times to avoid becoming a thorn in the flesh of journalists. Peer review and commentary can play an important role here by encouraging open discussion and debate around editorial policies that work and those that are moribund.

¹⁵ English, K., 2021. *Revitalising the public editor role*. [online] Available at: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/calendar/revitalising-public-editor-role>> [Accessed 19 July 2021].

Communicate openly about external forces

Media houses and journalists do not exist in a vacuum: there are several external factors and threats that can exert influence, preventing journalists from making independent professional decisions. Advertisers, media owners and political interests all have the potential to inhibit fair reporting. As far as possible, ensure your peer review process holds the space to discuss this openly and without judgement. Veteran reporters can guide newer colleagues on how to grow a thick skin and rebuff these hurdles and pressures.

More carrots, fewer sticks

Reward schemes and award programmes can be an excellent motivator in keeping reporters and editors accountable for their work. The Media Council of Kenya has an elaborate [annual award programme](#) to recognise excellence, but weekly or monthly schemes to reward diligence initiated by media houses themselves would have a further positive effect.

Secondly, it is no secret that many journalists in developing countries complain of poor remuneration. As has been proven elsewhere, poor pay often leads to professional malpractice such as the so-called ‘brown envelope’ journalism.¹⁶

Supplement with a mentorship programme

Apart from content analysis and appraisal by colleagues, media houses can go the extra mile by organising mentorship programmes that team veterans of various beats with newcomers. These programmes need not be internal only; journalists working for competing organisations should be encouraged to coach across borders in the overall interests of the industry and continued professional development.

¹⁶ Gokah, Theophilus Kofi, Dzokoto, Percival Kofi, and Ndiweni, Esinath E. "Brown Envelope Journalism, Policing the Policeman, Conflict of Interest and (media) Corporate Governance: The Case of Ghana.(Original Article)." *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance* 6.2 (2009): 167-179. Web.

Conclusion

Peer review along the model of Kenya's *Media Observer* fosters healthy conversation about the treatment of stories by the news media. When honest conversations like these are led by respected veterans of the industry, it has the impact of inspiring more journalists to take responsibility for their actions and inactions, and to strive for a higher quality of work.

Taking back control of these conversations from state regulators, and communicating clearly amongst ourselves what standards we hope to maintain, is a proactive and positive step our industry can take. It may not safeguard us from state interference, but it lays the groundwork for presenting a united front when necessary, and it is a signal to our audiences that we mean business when we claim we can provide fair, accurate, high quality information.

Despite its progressive constitution and an impressive press freedom score, the Kenyan government has been known to turn the heat on the media. President Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto have never shied away from publicly expressing their disdain for the media.¹⁷ The President has described newspapers as good for nothing, and only meant for “wrapping meat”. His deputy often [tweets](#) dismissing the news media.¹⁸

In a democracy, the importance of the media taking charge of its own destiny cannot be overstated, especially in an environment where state forces are capable of

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sE5CsBKEZKs>

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/williamsruto/status/1155563389155991552>

muzzling free speech. Exploring various efficient methods of self-regulation is the way to go, and peer review is one such method to consider.

For this to work, it is imperative that media houses not see themselves as singular units fighting over its share of the profits and audience numbers. They must begin to see each other as partners who can support each other's efforts in making the profession better and safeguarding its interests against common challenges such as poor content quality and unhealthy state controls.