The Challenges Facing Independent Newspapers in Sub-Saharan Africa

by Catherine W. Gicheru

Hilary and Trinity Terms 2014

Sponsor: Thomson Reuters Foundation
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Abstract

1.1 Overview of the African media landscape

1.2 A free and unfettered press?

2. The challenges faced by independent newspapers

3. Can the success of independent newspapers be measured?

4. Digital media: challenges and opportunities

5. Conclusions
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my very great appreciation to my supervisor, Paddy Coulter, for his patience, guidance and useful critiques of this paper. My special thanks go to John Lloyd, James Painter, David Levy, Prof Robert Picard and the RISJ staff (Alex, Kate, Monique, Tanya and Rebecca) for their encouragement and support.

I also thank all my colleagues who enriched the experience for me, especially my brothers from India and Hong Kong. The advice given by Eva Polonska-Kimunguyi, who opened her home and family to me, was greatly appreciated as was the warmth and welcome from Michael Mowat of Commonwealth House, with his hilarious reminisces of Kenya in the 1970s.

My thanks also go to the Star management for the opportunity to take time out to come to Oxford and to my friend and mentor, Karen Rothmyer for challenging me.

My deepest gratitude goes to my family for their love and encouragement —especially my mother and daughters whose frequent conversations kept me going.
Abstract

This paper looks at the private/independent media landscape in sub-Saharan Africa and sets out the factors that have contributed to the development of private newspapers. I hypothesise that while some of these factors exist at varying levels in most countries in the region under review, the development of media, and especially private newspapers, has taken quite different paths: from the exuberant and robust media of countries such as Nigeria or Kenya to those still operating under government control such as in Eritrea or Equatorial Guinea, to Rwanda or Ethiopia where newspapers are struggling to widen their space.

What are the factors that have led to this situation? What needs to be done to help the development of private/independent newspapers? And just what do we mean by private/independent media?

These are some of the questions I seek to answer in this paper. I start by defining the meaning of ‘independent newspapers’ and give a short overview of the political economy of the media in the continent before enumerating some of the factors that have contributed to the development of independent newspapers with specific reference to Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana where independent newspapers are considered ‘successful’. I have chosen the three countries because they are all organised as multi-party democracies, have the constitution as the supreme law and have also enshrined the right of free speech and access to information (Kenya and Ghana have yet to enact the law).

How can this success be measured? I present some matrixes that can be used to evaluate the success or otherwise of such newspapers. I also look at how the print media are taking up the opportunities presented by the new media technologies such as the internet, the growing access to mobile telephony and the increasing use of social media by citizen journalists and what impact this has had on such
newspapers.

I draw my insights from recent academic research as well as direct personal experience of being the editor of the Star, an independent newspaper in Nairobi, Kenya. I also used a descriptive survey method (or questionnaire) to get the views of 15 pre-eminent African media scholars, practitioners, editors and publishers.

I hope it will add to the growing literature on media development in sub-Saharan Africa; and that it will provide some insights for those considering setting up independent newspapers as well as have an impact in discussions surrounding policy decisions aimed at enabling an environment for the development of independent newspapers.
1.1 Overview of the African media landscape

Demographically, Africa is a ‘young’ continent with a median age of 18 years. This will remain significantly so in the future when it is estimated by the UN World Population 2012 Report, the continent will be home to one of every three children born in the world by 2050 (15 per cent of the entire world population) when the population is expected to reach 1.9 billion.

According to the same report, Nigeria has the highest population in the continent with just over 173 million people in 2012. Kenya’s population is estimated at 43 million which is nearly double that of Ghana with an estimated population of 26 million. The lure of the city has seen 37 per cent of the continent’s population migrate to the urban areas where majority of them live in informal settlements such as Kibera in Nairobi, Sodom and Gomorrah in Accra and Makoko in Lagos. In Nigeria, 46 per cent of the people live in urban areas with a sizeable number (66 per cent) living in such informal settlements. In Ghana, the figure of the urban dwellers is 48 per cent while in Kenya only 21 per cent of the people are attracted to the country’s urban areas.

According to UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics, 59 per cent of all adults in sub-Saharan Africa are literate compared to 70 per cent of the youth. Thirty seven per cent of the population lives in urban areas, most of them in informal settlements such as Kibera in Nairobi, Sodom and Gomorrah in Accra and Makoko in Nigeria. In Nigeria 46 percent of the population live in urban areas, while the urban population in Ghana and Kenya makes up 48 and 21 per cent, respectively.

World Bank figures suggest that more than 50 per cent of the people in the continent live on less than US$2 per day. Buying a newspaper is therefore a luxury for the majority of
these people and has led to a situation where people ‘hire’ or ‘lease’ newspapers for a fraction of the cover price and return. Most times the newspapers are only available in the urban areas since distribution networks and access still present a challenge in most countries. According to the ITU Study on International Internet Connectivity in sub-Saharan Africa in March 2013, Internet penetration is also very low with only two countries - Cape Verde and Seychelles - having more than 30 people per 100,000 using the Internet.

Africa is the fastest growing market for mobile telephony with an estimated 84% of the people saying they were occasional users of phones. There are least 650 million mobile phone subscribers and an estimated 700 million sim cards. The number of mobile phone subscribers is expected to rise to 930 million by late 2019. According to the Ericsson Mobility Research report of June 2014, three in four mobile subscriptions will be internet inclusive from the low specification feature phones that are available for less than $20 (£12) and a new range of smartphones such as Hauweij4Africa, Nokia, Samsung models which are expected to retail below $50 (£30). Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo have the most mobile subscriptions in sub-Saharan Africa.

According to an Afrobarometer October 2013 report, only 18 per cent of the people in Africa used mobile phones to connect with the Internet. However, research by Ericsson and GSM among others indicates mobile Internet use will increase twenty-fold in the next five years which is almost double the rate of growth predicted in the rest of the world. The declining cost of handsets and the price of data, along with the increase in transmission speeds, will enable more people, and especially the youth, to access social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, access mobile cash transfer services and consume the increasingly popular video and media services including games that are being developed by African ‘techies’ in such places as Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya. Currently, less than 12 per cent of the mobile phones are smartphones. A majority of the 28-35 year olds who comprise 18 per cent of those online connect with the
There are hundreds of community, university and private commercial radio stations which have been established since governments started liberalising the airwaves in the late 1990s. Private and public radio broadcasting exists in at least 39 countries with eight countries having only state-owned radio. Four other countries have partially privatised their television markets.

Radio is still the most popular source for news and information for a very large part of the population in the continent. A 2013 UNESCO report indicates that 90 per cent of the people in West Africa listen to the radio. While there has been poor uptake on solar- and wind-up radios, the radio listeners have fully taken to mobile phones which they use to participate in call-in talk shows which are popular with most stations, whether state-controlled public radio, privately-owned commercial or community-controlled radio stations.

Radio audiences in the urban areas are fragmented since many of the private commercial radios tend to concentrate their programming and content in favour of the “urbanites” and less on the concerns of the majority rural population. Community radio, by its nature, is limited to a certain locale or community. Vernacular radio stations may broadcast nationally but their core markets are the regions where the listeners predominantly speak and understand the language. Such stations like Coro, Inooro, Radio Ramogi or Nam Lolwe in Kenya target issues about and for these ethnic communities. Except for a very few of them, the majority of the radio stations have few reporters (if any at all) but depend on re-produing—sometimes verbatim or often with wild exaggerations and speculation—reports which they prepare on the basis of articles in that day’s newspapers.

According to the 2003 Who Owns the Media study by Djankov et al, governments in Africa controlled 61% of the top five daily newspapers by circulation, and reached 85% of the audience for the top five television stations. Two-thirds of the countries have state monopolies in television
broadcasting. Public broadcasting is yet to become a reality in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, as governments have shown a clear lack of political will or intent to fully transform the state-owned broadcast media. This failure to transform state into public broadcasters is in contravention of the 2002 African Union’s Commission on Human and People’s Rights declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa which many governments are signatory to and which sets out policy guidelines for developing a multi-tiered independent broadcast system.

Television is less widely available but with the influx of cheap televisions from China, more and more people, especially those in the rural areas, are able to acquire these sets. While news forms an important segment of the daily TV fare, many stations, especially in Kenya, provide their viewers with a steady diet of foreign programming — especially South American and Mexican telenovelas, Filipino and American soaps and tawdry reality shows — but also a heavy dose of AfroSinema movies from Nollywood.

Most newspapers also have an online presence. However, most of these websites have been primarily a reproduction of the day’s print edition with little or no change to the form, shape, style and presentation of the content. It is only in recent years that some of the newspaper websites have come to recognize the importance of their online presence and are making efforts to reap the benefits of introducing multi-media content as well as updating their websites regularly. For those with Internet access, the interaction with formerly ‘aloof’ newspaper editors and journalists has spawned a rash of bloggers and contributed to the growing phenomenon of citizen journalists. As posited by Esipisu and Kariithi (2007), the rapid development of new technologies is challenging the traditional definition of who is a journalist and will force newspapers to adapt or face extinction.

According to Prof Fackson Banda, “Citizen Journalists are the ‘latest frontier’ for journalistic communication and will force print and other traditional media to ‘revise their business model’ if they want to retain their audience.
Despite the popularity of broadcasting and especially radio, newspaper publishing which in the decades since the 1990s was booming in countries in eastern and southern Africa has continued to grow, though at a less than robust rate. In some countries, the rate of growth has declined due to the growing trend of ‘hiring’ (where one sold newspaper is read by ten or more readers), the growth of digital readership especially among the middle-classes who can afford tablets or laptops, the expansion of local language newspapers and the introduction of community-run newspapers or magazines. The growth has also been partly fuelled by the recent trend noted in places such as South Africa where some of the dominant print companies have been producing and distributing for free, news-sheets serving rural and other marginalised communities. State owned media—newspapers and broadcasting outlets—are becoming more the anomaly than the norm in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In the next chapter, I look at the factors that contribute to the development of independent newspapers.
1.2 A free and unfettered press?

In the May 1991 Declaration of Windhoek on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press, UNESCO member states declared their intention to establish, maintain and foster an independent, pluralistic and free press which was recognised as being essential for the social, political and economic development of the continent.

The definition of an independent press adapted in the declaration describes privately owned media as any media which is free of ‘government, political or economic control or of control of materials essential for its production and dissemination and pluralistic through the absence of media monopolies and the existence of the greatest number of newspapers magazines and periodicals all reflecting the widest possible range of opinion within the community.’

The definition seems to suggest that the print media are immune from economic and political influences even though, as commercial enterprises, they are run according to the business and market principles existing within their countries and therefore cannot claim to be operating independently.

For the sake of this paper, I consider the independent media to be privately owned newspapers which — despite the many constraints that exist—attempt to carry out, with varying degrees of success, their role of keeping watch over the government and holding them to account. In the subsequent chapters I will try to show how newspapers have attempted to address the constraints placed by political, economic and social forces but also how they are reacting in the face of the opportunities and challenges presented by new media.

The development of formal media in the continent started in
the 1800s when the first printing press was installed in West Africa. Ibrahim Seaga Shaw (2009) argues that the first phase of the media’s development was long before colonialism and is rooted in the African oral tradition where traditional story tellers (griots), poets, town criers and dancers were used to pass information to the community and were not just “mere praise singers” as claimed by Bourgault (1995:181). Those charged with preserving the knowledge and understanding of the community had a special place in society in that they could ‘criticise’ the ruler who would accept this as the will of the people.

The second phase in the development of media was marked by the introduction of the first newspapers: the Capetown Gazette in South Africa and the Yoruba/English bi-weekly newspaper Iwe Irohin in Nigeria were among the pioneer newspapers, which were set up by the Africa intelligentsia to mobilise and organise people in the fight against colonialism and injustices.

As noted by Mazrui (1975), it may have been a coincidence that the editors of these papers later became leaders of their countries at independence. However, Kwame Nkrumah’s Evening News in Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta’s Mwigungithania, Nnamdi Azikiwe’s West African Pilot, Julius Nyerere’s Uhuru and Herbert Macaulay’s Lagos Daily News were seen by these leaders as vehicles, not only to carry out the role of newspapers—entertain, inform and educate— but also had another responsibility: to mobilise the people behind the cause of independence. After independence, it was these same leaders who refused to relinquish control over the media and saw it as an instrument of state authority whose role was to provide propaganda.

Tight media controls and censorship became entrenched after independence in the 1960s. Many governments co-opted the independent newspapers that had been established by trade unionists, politicians of all shades and businessmen. Most of these newspapers which were set up to agitate for independence, either folded when independence was attained or were taken up by governments which considered them an integral part of the nation-building programs they embarked on. The media,
mostly radio but also newspapers, was taken to be one of the tools that governments could use in their pursuit of the pan-Africanist cause and to promote development.

Imbued with the fervour of the leaders of the first independent governments, many of whom had been educated in universities in the West, many of the early development communication scholars argued in favour of government controlling the media, especially radio, to mobilise the masses to develop. Lerner, 1959, Schramm, 1964 and Rogers 1967 were among the scholars who were convinced that the governments would not abuse the power they had over the media, but would use it for ‘national priorities and not self-aggrandizement’. In their naiveté, they bought into the independence government leaders who did not considered a free press a priority in their single-minded pursuit of the development goals that they had set for their countries. These leaders also realised they could not unleash an “unfettered media” on the newly independent population. “Many of the charismatic leaders of the early independence period were so personally involved in the creation of their nation’s future, that they equated criticism of the state to a personal attack.” (Wilcox, 1975; 29)

Many of these leaders were also deeply suspicious of a media which was increasingly adopting the mannerisms, behaviour and attitude more in tune with the Western liberal socialisation, which recognized the watchdog role of the media. “They believed that an emphasis on the promotion of unity was far more in keeping with African traditions. Africans were after all traditionally respectful of authority, and the divisive critic had been customarily viewed as irresponsible and somewhat ‘unsocialised’. A free and unbridled press, leaders felt, would be particularly pernicious, unleashing danger passions and anarchic political action especially among naïve and unschooled masses.” (Bourgault).

For two decades after independence, media houses, especially those that were owned by the government, were forced to engage in what is known ‘development journalism’ —the kind of reporting whose sole aim is to promote ‘development” but which came about as a kind of
compromise between “nation building” and a “free and unfettered press” (Bourgault, 1995:173). Independent media came under exceeding pressure to steer clear of politics and concentrate their efforts in producing ‘positive and inspiring’ articles about the developments that were taking place especially in the health, education and agriculture sectors. This kind of ‘sunshine journalism’ was supposed to lull the senses of the populace into believing that ‘development’ was actually taking place when all that was going on was the establishment of plutocracies, rise of clientelism, nepotism and entrenchment of corruption. Only a few dared to write stories critical of the independent government’s policies and development agenda.

As their development programmes failed one by one, the post-independence ruling elite turned the media into a powerful instrument to disseminate its political propaganda (Ronning, 1994). In many countries, the independent governments were overthrown either in military coups or through assassinations of incumbent presidents that led to elections that were heavily rigged. For example, Ghana went through five coups between 1966 and 1981 and there were six coups in Nigeria over a 27-year period starting from 1966 to 1993. The only coup in Kenya in 1982 failed. Each successive military or civilian ruler coming into office tightened his control over the media. For most of the 1980s and much into the 1990s, it was therefore not uncommon for newspapers to have on their front pages a photo and a story of the president at a mundane event such as a church service while television news broadcast and radio invariably led with two to four items of the ‘omnipotent’ president or military dictator. Instead of using media for ‘national priorities and not self-aggrandizement’ (Lerner, Schramm, Rogers) these leaders’ abuse of their control fuelled ‘cultish behaviour’ which led to such excesses displayed by self-declared ‘Emperor’ Jean Bedel Bokassa 1 or, as he declared when he adopted the Islamic faith, Salah Eddine Ahmed Bokassa.

The few newspapers and magazines that dared to be critical of the ruling elite were heavily censored, banned or silenced.
Anti-apartheid newspapers in South Africa such as the Mail and Guardian faced extremely difficult times which are however beyond the purview of this paper and are in any case the subject of numerous research studies on the subject by media scholars. In Kenya, Moi banned the highly critical *Target* newspaper that was owned by the National Council of Christian Churches of Kenya. He also went ahead to ban and declare as ‘seditious’ oppositional and dissident publications such as *Pambana, Mzalendo* and *Mwananchi* that emerged to give a platform to the growing opposition who were unable to get a forum in the mainstream newspapers or national radio or television. The private newspapers at this time were held in a tight stranglehold by the government that used its control on foreign exchange to muzzle the newspapers that needed foreign exchange to import newsprint and other consumables.

The government used its security agencies and the courts to arrest, charge and sentence journalists and others perceived to be ‘dissidents.’ In Nigeria, Tell newspaper, which had been started in 1991 by five journalists, had to ‘close shop’ due to constant harassment from the Sani Abacha regime which was displeased with the investigative stories which exposed the soft-underbelly of the military dictator. After having more than 500,000 copies of their newspaper seized over a four-month period, the journalists took to publishing their newspaper in secret and in different towns every week to evade the police seizures. The Sani Abacha tactics came to mind in early June 2014 when the Nigerian military confiscated and stopped the distribution of four national newspapers for criticising the military’s failure to rescue 200 schoolgirls who had been abducted in April this year.

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall which marked the end of the Cold War, African countries were caught up in the euphoria which saw opposition figures, civil society groups and even the media, mounting pressure on the authorities demanding not only political change but press freedom. As recorded by Guy Berger (2010): “A prominent moment in this was the Windhoek Declaration, agreed in 1991 in Namibia at a conference convened by UNESCO. This powerful statement gave rise to World Press Freedom Day,
which is commemorated worldwide on the anniversary of the conference. The Declaration set the standard in Africa that democracy had to mean press freedom and the existence of newspapers independent of government. This was a major breakthrough, as was the triumph of the related view that democracy required a multi-party system. A welcome consequence was the flourishing of privately-owned newspapers in many countries.”

Apart from marking the signing of the declaration, the UN General Assembly adopted May 3 as the World Press Freedom Day. On its tenth anniversary, member states expanded the declaration’s commitment to free media to include broadcast media leading to adoption of the African Charter on Broadcasting, a “modern blueprint for polices and laws determining broadcasting and information technology.”

Some of the leaders elected into office are still, 50 years after independence, reluctant to relinquish their hold over state media or even to reform it to become a public broadcaster. Instead, they seem to have adopted the media strategy adopted by China of having “social stability and development” over “openness and reform”. Few are willing to enact the Right to Information laws which would allow citizens access to information held by government and other public bodies. Some of these leaders in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Sudan have even gone to the extent of censoring, blocking or filtering the Internet.

The danger of the gains made in the last decade being taken back is ever present, as recent events have shown. In Kenya, journalists and media houses face severe fines if they are found to be in breach of the code of ethics; in Ethiopia, more than ten journalists have been jailed for long prison terms on vague terrorism charges; in Rwanda, criticism of the government has landed several journalists in court on vague allegations that they have denied the 1994 genocide or ‘divisionism’; insult laws as well as criminal libel and defamation laws are still on the statutes of most countries.
The African Union special rapporteur on freedom of expression, Faith Pansy Tlaluka, who launched a special initiative to lobby governments to repeal the criminal libel and defamation laws, is critical of leaders such as Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni, Ethiopia’s Haile Mariam Desalegn, Equatorial Guinea’s President Teodoro Obiang and Gambian President Yahya Jammeh who claim that press freedom and freedom of expression are less desirable than peace, stability and development. "Poverty has made people cynical about human rights and democracy. It is hardly possible to address the (Millennium Development Goals) without citizen participation, freedom of expression, and information," she is quoted in the February 21, 2012 issue of the African News Service.

Fifty years after most countries became independent, the media is still struggling to expand the space that it and the citizenry should occupy. Some of the governments have become subtler in how they exert control over the media. The rash of laws that seem innocuous on the surface but are highly coercive and restrictive in enforcement is one way this is being accomplished. The Kenya Information and Communication Act is one example; other instances are the anti-terrorism and cybercrime laws that are being debated or have been enacted in Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana. On the surface they seek to stop the (ab)use of the Internet in the commission of crimes, but on the whole, they are giving government agencies wide latitude to be able not only to monitor mobile conversations and emails, but to do so without any court order. It therefore should not come as a surprise that according to a 2013 Freedom House report, some countries, including Kenya and Nigeria, have been experimenting with malware that is capable of monitoring the emails and online activities of its citizens. These attempts to restrain the media are being made despite the adoption of very progressive constitutions that guarantee freedom of expression and a free press. In the next section, I look at what some of these challenges are.
2. The challenges faced by independent newspapers

Most of the new constitutions adopted by sub-Saharan countries in the last two decades categorically guarantee the freedom of the press and the right to free expression. For example, the Ghanaian constitution (1992) states in sections 3 and 4 of Article 162 that:

3) “There shall be no impediment to the establishment of a private press or media and in particular, there shall be no law requiring any person to obtain a license as a prerequisite for the establishment of a newspaper, journal or other media for mass communication or information, and

(4) “Editors and publishers of newspapers and other institutions of the mass media shall not be subject to control or interference by the government, nor shall they be penalized or harassed for their editorial opinions and views, or the content of their publications”.

The 1999 Nigerian constitution Chapter 2 section 22 states that:

“The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people.”

Chapter 4 section 39 subsection (1) guarantees the freedom of expression while subsection (2) talks of the right to establish and operate any medium of mass communication for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinion.
The enjoyment of these rights are, however, restricted by criminal libel laws, libel, defamation, sedition, contempt of court, the Official Secrets Act which are among some of the archaic statutes still retained by many governments. These have been described as “the most pervasive, repressive and dangerous form of media regulations” (Walden, 2002). Criminal defamation laws are usually too broad in their definition of what constitutes defamation; they fail to provide for adequate defences and usually result in excessive punishments such as penal fines or even jail for the offending journalist and the media house.

Private newspapers also have to contend with hostility from governments who seem to use every pretext they can to intimidate and attempt to coerce them into submission, either through the application of shifting and undefined regulations to protect what is defined as “blasphemy, official secrecy, insult, terrorism, national security, hate speech, public morals” among others. Yet all the newspapers have done is to be critical of the government, public official or head of state who, not wanting to be closely scrutinised, resorts to the use of the criminal defamation laws.

In Kenya, the penal code has several offences which range from the Public Order Act which makes it a criminal offence to insult the president, the Evidence Act, the Trespass Act, the National Assembly Powers and Privileges Act and the Prison Code of Regulations all have provisions against insults and prescribe stiff fines and even jail terms for those convicted. The laws banning ‘genocide ideology’ and ‘sectarianism’ ‘divisionism’ in Rwanda have been used to silence the voices of the opposition including the imprisonment of journalists and led to a climate of self-censorship among the media. In Ethiopia, journalists who criticise the ruling elite have found themselves jailed or detained under the deeply flawed anti-terrorism laws.

In March 2, 2006 the Standard newsroom in Kenya was raided by masked policemen who not only dismantled the printing press but also took away computers and other equipment before setting fire to thousands of newspapers awaiting distribution. The police were acting on information
about an “intended act” that would threaten national security. In 2005, the then First Lady Lucy Kibaki stormed into the Nation Media Group newsroom where she slapped a cameraman who attempted to record her impromptu visit.

In October 2008, Tanzania’s Information Minister George Mkuchika banned the radical tabloid, *Mwanahalisi*, for three months for allegedly publishing articles that “ridicule senior government leaders including President Jakaya Kikwete and the ruling Chama cha Mapinduzi.” (allAfrica.com) In September 2008, two men were arrested and charged with insulting President Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi simply because they were overheard criticising his education policy in a private conversation.(allAfrica.com) They were acquitted four months later. In April 2013, the Burundian senate passed a law which bars reporters from reporting on among other subjects “information that could affect the credit of the state and the national economy” and “information that could affect the stability of the currency” and anything that might “affect the morality and good conduct, honour and human dignity and privacy of individuals.”

Only 11 countries out of 54 in the continent have enacted laws that advance the freedom of expression. Ghana is the only country to have fully repealed insult and criminal defamation while others have made partial amendments but have yet to fully implement the Declaration of Table Mountain that calls for the repeal of such laws.

Other legal restrictions that hinder the establishment of private media include barriers on who can become a journalist, burdensome accreditation processes, the high cost demanded by investors interested in registering and establishing private newspapers and the licensing regimes for newspapers. In Ethiopia as in many countries in the continent, all newspapers are required to renew their licences annually. However, in Ethiopia, before newspapers are issued with their licence, they must first prove they are not insolvent and are able to maintain a bank balance of Br 10,000 (US$1,250) as collateral against any offences their journalists might commit. In Eritrea, the 1996 Press Proclamation Law mandates that all newspapers and
journalists be licensed. It also stipulates that publications must be submitted for government approval prior to release, and prohibits reprinting articles from banned publications. In 2001, the government banned all privately owned newspapers. In 2013, Eritrea was ranked ‘among the worst media environments’ by Freedom House Press Freedom Index and had by 2013 jailed 28 journalists, several of whom have since died in prison.

Another factor that may inhibit the development of independent newspapers is the taxation and business regulation regime such as the existence of prohibitive taxes on media-related equipment such as printing presses, consumables such as newsprint and ink as well as sales taxes on newspapers. For example, the cost of a daily newspaper in Kenya is Sh50 of which 16 per cent is Value Added Tax imposed by the government which also collects taxes on imports such as newsprint and other consumables including equipment such as computers, laptops and cameras.

The impact such legal constraints have had on the establishment of independent and private media has been commented upon by among others, Tettey (2001), Ogbondah, (1997: 276), Heo, Uhm, and Chang (2000), Webster (1992) as cited by Islam (2002). Those in favour of licensing claim it serves the public interest by encouraging responsibility and standards in reporting while those opposed counter that licences allow regulators to prevent the employment of journalists who might cover the government unfavourably.

“The problem with press freedom in Africa is not that there is an absence of a body of laws or constitutional provisions guarantee that freedom. The problem is that arbitrary actions, extra-legal measures and instruments of violence and coercion are utilized by the state in attempts to curb the right of freedom of expression. Those extra-legal measures utilised during the post-independence are still used in many countries to restrict the dissemination of pluralistic views and information in the mass media. This is in spite of constitutional provisions guaranteeing those

Article 9 of the Africa Charter for Human and People's Rights states that every individual has a right to receive information; and the right to express and disseminate his/her opinion within the law. Only 17 out of the 54 countries have constitutional guarantees for the right to information. Eleven countries—South Africa, Angola, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ethiopia, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Guinea Conakry, Tunisia and Rwanda - have enacted the FOIA.

However, the existence of an access to information law does not mean that it will be acted upon. In South Africa, at least 40 per cent of the requests for information that have been made to public servants have gone unanswered. In Uganda, two journalists who wanted to compel the government to disclose information on the oil exploitation agreements lost their court case.

In 2013, the African Union adopted a model Access to Information Law that gives specific guidelines in terms of form and content of the legislations to be passed by the individual countries. The model law takes into account such factors as poor record keeping and the pervasive culture of secrecy within much of the civil service in Africa. It also broadens the scope beyond the public sector as some governments have outsourced some of the public services to private institutions.

The lack of a right to information law should, however, not present an insurmountable hurdle if governments were compelled to maintain records and easily searchable and accessible databases of the information collected. Rwanda has been able to digitize its land administration system, its business and construction permits regime as well as make it easy for companies to pay taxes among other services.

---

1 This right is also recognized in five other African Union treaties: Article 19 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, Articles 9 and 12(4) of the African Union Convention Against Corruption, Articles 10(3d) and 11(2i) of the African Union Youth Charter, Article 6 of the African Charter on Values and Principles of Public Service and administration, and Article 3 of the African Statistics Charter.
However, due to self-censorship, lack of skills and knowledge, few journalists or media houses exploit these databases for stories.

In 2011, Kenya launched the first government-backed open data portal which allows the public access to over 400 government datasets that have details about state budgets, census and demographic information on health, education, public works and other service delivery data. But many journalists have yet to take advantage of this access to improve or augment their reportage for the benefit of their readers, a majority of whom have no Internet capability to access the information or the knowledge needed to absorb it. The Code4Kenya, a project by the World Bank's Innovation Fund and Governance Partnership Facility, together with the Africa Media Initiative's Digital Projects Division, is attempting to address this problem. In 2012, the Ghana Open Data Initiative was started with the aim of promoting efficiency, transparency and accountability as well as providing citizens with information. As in Kenya, the biggest challenge is making the public aware they can access information, ensuring public offices keep searchable databases or records and reducing the high application fees required and which are forfeit whether or not the information requested is available or not.

Another hurdle newspapers have to face is getting access to advertising revenues, whether from private corporations and businesses or from the government. An advertising code of conduct is needed to guard against misleading and inappropriate content. Such a code would also give clear guidelines on the need to separate advertising and editorial content. It would also ensure that the government did not discriminate against some media outlets when it came to the placement of advertising.

This is especially crucial in most countries that have poorly developed commercial advertising and where state-funded advertising is usually the single largest source of revenue for most private media. According to a UNESCO study on world trends and media development in the continent, 18
governments out of the 30 African countries studied used such advertising for partisan political support while others used the threat of withdrawal to pressure some of the media outlets. An advertising code would not only ensure that government advertising was done in a fair, non-discriminatory and transparent manner, but would also serve to insulate the newspaper’s editorial independence. For example, it would not lead to the situation that happened in Tanzania in 2010 when the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi placed full page advertising on the front and back pages of all but a couple of the newspapers in that country to suppress the coverage of the opposition’s inaugural rally. This meant that the story was placed in the inside pages thereby deflecting the impact it would have had.

But even where such a code exists, it usually lacks the power to compel governments on where to allocate its advertising money. For example, the Kenya Code of Advertising Practice and Direct Marketing which covers a wide range of issues on commercial, non-commercial, political and advocacy advertising is silent on the issue of fair allocation of government advertising. The Kenyan government is currently toying with the idea of setting up a government agency which will handle all government advertising. Aimed at monitoring and reducing the money spent on advertising, such an agency will be a powerful way of government using the allocation or withdrawal of advertising to pressure critical newspapers into submission if not close to financial bankruptcy.

A newspaper’s credibility is dependent on the conduct of its journalists and how knowledgeable, objective, accurate, impartial and ethical they are in the information they present to the public. To ensure high ethical and professional standards, there should be a self-regulatory mechanism within the media to draw up and enforce a code of ethics and conduct and to address complaints from the readers. Such a mechanism should be free from the control of government and commercial interests and should involve journalists, publishers and the public. Ghana and Kenya have media councils while Nigeria has a press council but all have similar responsibilities—promoting high
professional standards and dealing with complaints emanating from the public about the conduct of journalists in their professional capacity or journalists’ complaints about the conduct of individuals or organisations towards the press. At the newspaper level, having a public editor is one way of ensuring that a system exists for addressing public complaints about the violation of ethical standards by journalists and that the newspaper responds to such complaints.

Under international law, the right to freedom of expression does not place an absolute ban on prior censorship. However, according to the international press freedom organisation, Article 19, this “should be a highly exceptional measure, taken only when a publication threatens grave harm, such as loss of life or serious harm to health, safety or the environment. An article deemed defamatory, blasphemous, obscene or overly critical of the government would rarely if ever meet this threshold”.

However, most governments, in total violation of their own laws and constitutions, continue to impose prior censorship on media. Some of the ways in which governments censor newspapers include threats ranging from accessing newsprint to threats of closure or seizure of newspapers, disabling of printing presses and seizure of equipment as happened to the Standard Group and the Nigerian newspapers as mentioned above. Another example of government intervention is the 2013 incident where soldiers raided and occupied the Monitor newsroom for more than a week in search of a letter criticising President Yoweri Museveni’s grooming of his son to take over as head of state. In June 2014 five top newspapers in Nigeria were seized by the military incensed by the less than salubrious coverage of their efforts to deal with the Boko Haram insurgents in the north east of the country and rescue the 200 schools abducted three months earlier. Coincidentally, the authorities in these countries all cited “national security” as the reason for their actions without clear definition of what threat was posed by these publications.
Government censorship extends to the Internet even though most people do not have access. Many countries restrict access to content on the Internet while others have banned Internet access altogether. According to the OpenNet Initiative, an organisation which collects information about web filtering and surveillance around the world, governments filter information for political content which is critical of its policies, human rights, religious rights; also for social sites that focus on sexuality, gambling drugs and subjects considered offensive and web pages related to wars, skirmishes, dissent and other conflicts as well as sites that offer internet tools and ways of circumventing censorship.

One of the guiding principles should be that the end-user and not a commercial service provider or the state should control any filtering system. However, according to Freedom House’s Freedom on the Net report 2013, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe have some of the strictest surveillance laws and controls over the Internet, which present threats to press freedom and also limit access to information.

The most commonly used methods to deny citizens access are through blocking and filtering access to political and social content, launching cyber-attacks against websites run by critical activists or opposition political parties, and enacting laws that criminalise certain types of political, religious or social speech either explicitly or through vaguely wording which can be interpreted in such a way.

Many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have enacted anti-terrorism and cyber security laws that give them expansive surveillance privileges and reduce citizens’ right to privacy. Kenya’s 2003 Suppression of Terrorism Bill prohibited “collect[ing],” “mak[ing]” or “transmit[ting]” information that may be helpful to terrorist organisations, including online information. The bill provoked such outrage among Kenyans, many of who were worried about how the government planned to define what constituted “helpful” information, that it was eventually rejected by Parliament.

However, anti-terrorism bills in countries ranging from South Africa to Tanzania have increased governments’
ability to conduct surveillance for loosely defined national security purposes. In Nigeria, the Lawful Interception of Communications Regulations gives authorities the right to monitor data and voice content without a court order. Nigeria also supported a proposal by Russia and China that sought to have the International Telecommunications Regulations expanded to allow national governments to have regulatory jurisdiction over the Internet. The proposal, presented during the 2012 ITU World Conference on International Communications held in Dubai, failed due to opposition from countries such as Kenya, Egypt, the US and the UK who were concerned that the regulations would threaten Internet freedom.

Apart from an enabling legal environment, another important factor for the establishment of independent newspapers is access to capital. One of the most effective ways for governments to stifle criticism is to starve independent news businesses of finance. Many news outlets that do not have capital to grow are condemned to die, unable to overcome the challenges posed by their economic or political environment or compete with state-subsidised competitors. In many countries, the only capital available comes from politicians or businessmen with close political or government links. Such financing always comes with strings attached—investment is available but only in return for editorial influence.

Since the media market in most countries is both fragmented and small, most financial institutions are reluctant to take risks to finance newspapers. Ghana is one country where the establishment of an independent media development fund is enshrined in the constitution. However, most countries have to depend on financial assistance offered by such organisations like the Media Development Investment Fund and the South Africa Media Development or depend on a mixture of private investor funding and commercial loans as the Star newspaper has done. Such newspapers either lease time on government-owned or commercial printing presses if they cannot buy their own. Invariably, as experienced at the Star, a newspaper has to have its own printing press if it does not want to be held
hostage to the interests and vicissitudes of the printer.

While literacy rates in most countries have improved markedly since the 1990s, the levels of media literacy—the ability of citizens to access analysis, evaluate media content and understand the role that media and information play in national development—is still very low. Improved media literacy will not only enable citizens to be able to understand the messages and information being disseminated but will help them identify the bias, spin, misinformation or lies but also evaluate what gaps there may be in such media content. A media literate public is able to advocate and participate in campaigns for independence of the media, press freedom, the passage of Freedom of Information Bills, media ownership and control, the type of media advertising targeting children and adolescents, media stereotypes and discrimination on gender, minorities, religion, race among other issues which impede the media in fulfilling its role. A media literate public is also able to engage with the media by learning skills, including ICT skills, which they can use to express themselves and develop user-generated content.

Media literacy activities include establishing watchdog groups to raise citizens’ awareness about how the media covers different issues such as gender-based, election and campaign violence, tobacco and alcohol advertising, resource allocation and sharing, among others. Holding public forums where people can discuss current affairs and educate themselves on these issues is also one way of instilling media literacy. From my experience at the Star, a public editor (news ombudsman) in the newsroom also contributes significantly to the education of the public about how the media operates and how editorial decisions are arrived at. The public editor also has a role in pointing out ethical lapses in editorial content and to be effective, has to gain the respect of editorial staff and gain the trust of the public. Publishing and promoting media monitoring results helps to create awareness of media practices and processes.

Newspapers which hope to aspire, maintain and grow their
readers must observe high professional standards including a willingness to set and observe a code of ethics and conduct for the journalists, the advertisers as well as in the management and technical aspects. (BBC World Service Trust report, 2006) The *Leadership and Guiding Principles for African media owners and managers*, developed by the Africa Media Initiative and adopted during an African Media Leaders Forum in Tunis in 2011, seeks to foster a culture of transparency, good governance and accountability among media owners and operators. The principles also address issues of ‘owner-editors’ — owners of newspapers who designate themselves as editors thereby obliterating or making porous the wall between business and editorial interests.

Media managers and editors must have the business skills to be able to resist the attempts by governments and other non-media actors such as advertising agencies and businesses to influence or manipulate content through placement of advertisements. For example, in July 2013, when the automated teller machines of one of the largest banks in Kenya, Equity, failed to work for several days, this was largely unreported except for social media and online news reports because the bank is one of biggest advertisers and the boss is known to have close links with CEOs of media houses. On the other hand, the refusal by some government and pro-government companies to advertise can lead to the collapse of a title. For example, in 2011, the leading critical online newspaper, *234Next*, folded partly due to being denied advertising.

As Aidan White, Director of the Ethical Journalism Network, a global campaign promoting good governance and ethical conduct in media, aptly states in his *Guide for Self-Regulation for Egyptian Media*: “Moral behaviour in the boardroom ultimately decides the quality of journalism. It is as important for building public trust as the performance of journalists in the newsroom. Unless media are led by people of principle there is little chance that journalism will deliver the quality of information that communities need and democracy requires.” While these principles are not legally binding, they provide the media owners and operators with
guidelines which, if they applied them in their newspapers, would create an enhance media independence, sustainability and professionalism.

To ease some of the tensions inherent between the journalists and the media owners/editors or boards, there should be associations that work for the protection of journalists’ rights and promote quality journalism. Such associations include a self-regulatory council that would draw up and enforce the journalists code of ethics and conduct and address issues such as conflict of interest, bias, ‘brown envelope’ or ‘gombo’ journalism (where reporters are ‘gifted’ with cash for news coverage) or ‘beat associations’ (common in Nigeria where reporters on a beat share stories leading to a situation where multiple and different titles all carry the same story). Such a council can also address complaints about the media.

For a newspaper to maintain its editorial independence, it needs to be well-managed, efficient and financially self-sustaining. It should be able to receive revenue from a multitude of sources and not solely depend on advertising and circulation revenues. Private newspapers also run the risk of being reduced to providing superficial content or what Hughes and Lawson (2004) have described as the “trivilialisation and tabloidisation of the news” in their attempt to get circulation or advertising numbers up. This problem is however not unique to newspapers in Africa but is an accusation that can be levelled at media in mature democracies such as US and Europe.

Newspapers also need to have reliable audience and market research data if they are to formulate strategies that will widen their revenue sources and enable them meet the needs of their readers. Knowledge gained from such research ensures that the newspaper is able to take advantage of an existing niche in the market and position itself accordingly. To break into the duopoly which is a feature of the Kenya newspaper sector, The Star (whose motto is ‘Fresh, Independent, Fearless’) initially started out as a tabloid in the style of the New York Post but switched to broad news coverage and styled itself as the newspaper for
the “thinking reader” with its ‘open forum’ opinion pages. Its target is the upwardly mobile, young professionals. Its reportage on the behind-the-scenes goings-on in politics and the popular column of political gossip, *Corridors of Power*, have also become extremely popular with the political class. Most countries do not have institutions to monitor circulation, readership demands or even provide advertising data.

With newspaper subscription a rarity in majority of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, most media houses depend on on-street copy sales. This means that to increase circulation numbers, newspapers have to be distributed as widely as possible to get to as many readers as possible. Poor road infrastructure and distribution networks mean that large areas of the rural areas where majority of the people live are poorly served with newspapers. As the chairman of the African Media Initiative, Eric Chinje, notes: “One of the most important challenges across Africa today has to do with newspaper distribution.”

The situation is most acute in Francophone Africa where crises in the economy and financial industry resulted in the uprooting of the sole France-based distributor and the inability by sector actors to come up with a solution. In non-French-speaking countries, the problem is a direct offshoot of infrastructure-related and investment challenges. However, despite low circulation numbers, newspaper readership is extremely high due to the phenomenon of ‘leasing’ (where a newspaper vendor charges a fraction of the cover price for someone to read the paper and return it) and or where between 10 and 12 people read each purchased newspaper. In Nigeria, there are the FANatics or members of the informal FAN (Free Readers Association of Nigeria) which is refers to citizens who crowd round a newspaper vendor’s table to read newspapers for free without actually buying any. This phenomenon and its various variations are also common in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

While media assistance in the last three decades has been mainly on providing training for journalists, improving
content, supporting democracy and human rights, there is a yawning gap in the provision of skills aimed at creating financially sustainable business models. Most of the media in emerging democracies lack skills in the commercial and sales departments that are crucial for enhanced revenue generation and financial stability, according to the WAN/IFRA Financially viable media in emerging and developing economies report. The report indicates that while new technologies and multimedia operations do not yet present a business or editorial challenge in emerging and developing economies, they “areas of opportunities for revenue generation and improved efficiencies.” It is however imperative for newspapers and media managers start considering these challenges as the Internet and new news productions will inevitably change. As Guy Berger (2009) writes, “Finally, the Internet will find its way into the African media environment via model wireless devices like cellphones, and African media leaders should be preparing for this already emerging scenario.”

The factors cited above are by no means exhaustive as different countries and environments impact differently on how independent newspapers can be established and hope to thrive. They, however, represent a synopsis of the factors that have hindered and continue to present hurdles in the establishment, growth, success and sustainability of independent newspapers. A legal environment that not only protects free expression and freedom of the press and establishes independent institutions that ensure that these constitutional guarantees are adhered to is one of the main factors.

Access to capital and skills training not only for editorial staff but also for those on the commercial and business sides are also imperative if the newspapers are to be sustainable and withstand the pressures from the advertising and, indeed, government influence. Print newspapers in sub-Saharan Africa must learn from what has happened to the print media in the US and Europe and devise new ways and strategies of incorporating these technologies in their operations if they hope to remain in business and be successful. The strategies adopted must
not necessarily replicate those adopted elsewhere but must bear in mind each country’s unique media situation.
3. Can the success of independent newspapers be measured?

Attempts to measure the performance of the private media under the prism of the Western liberal democracy concept has been criticised by many African media scholars who say it does not fully capture the unique differences that exist in the continent. According to Berger (2002), transplanting the Western liberal democratic concept of media practice is problematic as certain assumptions are made about the media landscape in Africa. “For instance, if much African media has historically played a political propagandist role or a developmentalist role, it does not serve any explanatory purpose to hold up a watchdog model and measure Africa’s historic deficit.” Such assumptions presuppose that the continent is well served with media, and that the audiences are media literate and are therefore able to interact and engage with the media to articulate their interests. This is far from the reality as a large section of the citizenry in sub-Saharan Africa still does not have access to private newspapers while the levels of media literacy are dismally low.

Nyamnjoh (2005) goes further by arguing that trying to transplant and implement this concept was “like trying to force onto the body of a full-figured person, rich in all the cultural indicators of health Africans are familiar with, a dress made to fit the slim de-fleshed Hollywood consumer model of a Barbie doll-type entertainment icon.” He is critical of what he says is the media’s failure to re-define their role to suit their own circumstances and instead continues to uncritically view itself from a foreign prism which lays emphasis on the rights of the individual while underplaying the rights of communities. The media’s perceived role is far removed from the aspirations of the African public it claims to be representing, making it more of a liability than an asset to the aspirations of the communities they target.
The role of independent newspapers in the African context goes beyond just keeping watch on government and exposing malfeasance. Newspapers have the additional role of promoting tolerance and reconciliation, educating citizens about their civic rights and responsibilities, and mobilising the public to become engaged in politics; informing the public about government performance and informing policy makers about citizen interests and policy outcomes. In his ‘Democracy as a Universal Value published in the Journal of Democracy’ (1999) Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen sees private media as being essential for furthering economic and human development. With such a multiplicity of roles and responsibilities, how can we then define what constitutes a successful private newspaper?

In this chapter, I attempt to argue that since independent newspapers in the continent have a multiplicity of roles, the current assessment frameworks used to assess the success or define their success need to be reviewed to take into account the unique political and socio-economic differences within African countries. The assessment frameworks currently in use pre-suppose that ‘onesize fits all’ and ignore the inherent differences in the different countries in the continent. In their comparative study categorising the democratic transitions that nations go through, Price et al. in their book Media Reform: Democratizing the Media, Democratizing the State (2002) argue that at each phase of democratisation, the media exhibits different characteristics that necessitate different policy initiatives and responses. Since most African countries are at different phases of democratisation, why should the same yardstick be used to measure or assess the media in a failed state such as Somalia, a fragile/authoritarian country such as Rwanda, a primary transition state such as Ghana or a late transition society/consolidating democracy like Botswana or Mauritius? Price goes on to argue that since ‘weak economies force media to seek support from political or other actors with narrow interests and away from independence’ it was not feasible to measure, compare and rank the media systems of countries with robust economies like Nigeria and South Africa on the one hand, with
extremely poor countries like Burundi and Burkina Faso.

The answer to this dilemma is suggested by Bama (2010), who asserts that a media assessment framework should be grounded in African cultural, economic and political realities “(for instance, a respect for the elders and the reduced emphasis on the primacy of the individual over the community) and the economic and political contexts on the continent, including attention to historic ethnic sensitivities at play in some of the African countries.”

Although he is critical of the Africa Peer Review Mechanism’s failure to include media assessment in its mandate, Bama argues for a media assessment mechanism and process based on African socio-cultural norms drawn up by African media practitioners such as the African Editors Guild, culture critics, communication experts, media scholars and other stakeholders. To ensure the assessment is robust, he suggests that assessment should be done by a team of peers from another country instead of the current method which is used by many media assessment organisations which have in-country teams assessing their own media.

This is the methodology applied in the US-based International Research and Exchange (IREX) Media Sustainability Index where, apart from in-country panel assessment, external experts are usually involved in giving their analysis. Bama argues that many of the existing frameworks are also limited in what they assess: for example, the Media Sustainability Index focuses more on the economic sustainability of media while the Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index and Freedom House’s Freedom of the Press Index look at press freedom violations and not on the enabling environment needed for the development of private independent media. He concedes that while the African Media Barometer was developed with the involvement of African media experts, practitioners and scholars and has been able to deliver regular bi-annual, in-depth and comprehensive assessments of the media situation in most countries of sub-Saharan Africa (Paasch), its findings could be more robust if it incorporated one
aspect of the APRM, namely to have the media of a country assessed by a team of peers from another country.

Despite this lack of an ‘Africa-centric’ media assessment framework, I want to argue that at the level of individual newspapers, several measures can be used to measure their success such as a steady growth in the number of newspapers circulated, an increase in advertising revenues and a large news hole (the amount of space available daily for news). The content measures for a large news hole include a high ratio of staff-written copy to wire or syndicated copy, the total amount of non-advertising space, a high ratio of in-depth soft to hard news, a high ratio of illustrations and photos to text, length of the average news story and high ratio of non-advertising to advertising content in the news sections. The attempt to strike a balance between the editorial and advertising needs is the daily struggle in any successful newspaper.

Another measure of success is whether newspapers pay the journalists well enough not only to discourage the unethical practice of ‘brown envelope’ ‘gombo’ or ‘ATM’ journalism but also to retain skilled staff who tend to leave for better paying jobs in international and local NGOs and public relations firms. According to an African Media Barometer 2011 survey on Nigerian media, the journalists’ working conditions were “simply deplorable” with journalists being paid very low salaries and those in private newspapers being paid only intermittently. “Corruption is eating deep into the fabric of the Nigerian media, and is unfortunately condoned by the media proprietors who sometimes encourage reporters to extort money from newsmakers in lieu of their salaries,” states the report. This situation is not unique to Nigeria as it is replicated in countries across sub-Saharan Africa. The main difference is the degree to which journalists engage in such unethical behaviour and whether or not professional journalists associations are making attempts to deal with the situation.

Another measure of success is the trust and confidence that the public has in the newspapers. It is difficult to quantify this as such an assessment is usually very subjective or is
based on inadequate data. Public trust is based on the
credibility of the news published in the newspaper.
Credibility is based on the knowledge, expertise,
competence, objectivity, accuracy, and lack of bias
(Stockman 2006) as reflected in the newspaper’s content.
The publication of inaccurate, sensational or misleading
reports harms a newspaper’s credibility as much as
presenting biased reports and diminishes a newspaper’s
role of holding government to account. Two examples will
suffice. On May 10, 2014, one of Nigeria’s oldest and most
prestigious newspapers, the Saturday Vanguard, published
a report and a photo indicating that US marines had
identified the location where the abducted schoolgirls were
being held and had even arrested one of masterminds of the
kidnap. The report turned out to be false. In Swaziland, the
Times of Swazi and the Swazi Observer, in reporting on the
contempt charges against Nation magazine editor Thulani
Maseko, deliberately misrepresented the events in court
when they failed to report Maseko’s speech in which he
criticised the country’s monarchy system and the role of
King Mswati III.

Trust in the media is eroded if the public perceives that the
information being presented is inaccurate, biased or spun to
suit political or business interests. In such a situation, the
public looks for alternatives that have implications for
circulation, advertising and the overall profitability of a
newspaper. According to Meyer and Hester (2003), there is a
direct correlation between a newspaper’s loss of credibility
and advertising—the less credible a newspaper is, the less
advertising it will receive.

Trust in media is related to persuasion (Kinder, 1998),
framing (Druckman 2001), agenda setting (Iyengar and
Kinder 1985) and priming (Miller and Krosnick 2000).
Agenda setting refers to the way a newspaper place
emphasis on certain issues and the amount of coverage they
give to such issues. An example is the peace messaging that
media outlets in Kenya engaged in before, during and after
the 2013 elections. Priming, which is considered an
extension of agenda setting, refers to “changes in the
standards that people use to make political evaluations”
(Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p.63) and occurs when newspaper content suggests to readers specific issues they should use to evaluate the performance of leaders and governments. Framing refers to how the media characterises an issue and thereby influences how it is understood by the readers, while persuasion refers to the newspaper’s ability to persuade the audience to believe or do something through the use of such techniques as the use of direct quotes from identified sources, photographs or videos of an event to show that the story and information being disseminated is accurate. As defined by Dillard (2010) persuasion is “the use of symbols (sometimes accompanied by images) by one social actor for the purpose of changing or maintaining another social actor’s opinion or behaviour (p.203)”.

The rise of bloggers and citizen journalists means that the public is no longer the passive recipient and consumer of media but is now able to contribute in generating and disseminating content and passing comments on the work of professional journalists and engaging with the media practitioners. However, this is limited to the few who have access to the Internet. The growth in mobile phones with internet access capability, the possibility of cheaper data and fast internet speeds will mean that more people will be able interact directly with newspapers just as they are now doing with radio call-in shows which are hugely popular in most countries.

Whether the media outlet is government or privately owned also has a bearing on whether it is trusted or not. In their study to analyse trust in media in 16 African countries, Moehler and Singh (2011) found that while government-owned broadcast media were more trusted than private commercial stations, the public had more trust in private print media than government-owned print media except in a few countries. The citizens’ perception of media credibility and trust affects how they consume the media and has an impact on their political attitudes (Stockmann 2006, 3). According to research cited by Moehler and Singh, individuals are persuaded to consider and act on new information if they perceive the provider to be
knowledgeable.

The impact a newspaper has on public policy and the public depends on how widely it is circulated and the level of trust the public has in the publication. Discerning its impact, newspapers can conduct public opinion polls relating to trust and confidence in the media, do interviews with samples of readers/viewers or listeners on their perception of the media, and carry out content analysis, engagement data and media monitoring. For newspapers that have online editions, there are various social media tools that can be used to measure audience size, page views, ad impressions but also reader reactions, preferences (likes) among others.

The various frameworks used to assess media may be wanting but what is evidently clear is that successful newspapers are not only those which have a high circulation, but they must also be financially sustainable, have well researched, well presented content which is not only interactive and engaging, but also gives the readers the news and information they require to make informed decisions in a fair and objective manner. Editorial independence, professionalism, quality content, trustworthiness, credibility of newspapers and plurality of news top the list of measures by which the success of a newspaper can be gauged. High circulation, financial sustainability, circulation and profitability are outcomes of the intangible benefits that invariably follow good, well-written, well-illustrated and well-displayed content.
4. Digital media: challenges and opportunities

According to IREX 2013, traditional media remain the preferred source of news in most of sub-Saharan Africa. There has been a varied response to the changes brought about by new media technologies. In Mali journalists characterise online media as in its infancy. In Botswana, journalists do not adequately use online resources to gather and distribute news. Online advertising is flourishing in Malawi but questions of profitability remain. Namibia’s lack of local language content online presents a barrier to many; in Burundi and many other countries, the steep cost involved prevents access. In Ethiopia, critical bloggers find their content blocked periodically and report cases of threats. However, in other countries such as Kenya, improved affordability and availability of Internet has been welcomed. In Liberia, Internet-broadcast radio shows potential sustainability while in Angola, online media provide an outlet for critical analysis of the government. Radio continues to dominate as the main source of information and news for majority of the people in sub-Saharan Africa compared to newspapers and television.

The Internet, however, offers people new possibilities of communication outside the sphere of mainstream media. There are huge regional differences in the development of media technology (Teer-Tomaselli et al, 2007) and in many countries, a majority of the ordinary people lack access. Internet access is scarcer in sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else in the world. In many countries Internet penetration rates are less than one percent leading to what Berenger (2006) describes as the ‘digital divide’ within the continent. But the continent’s new submarine and terrestrial cables, the rollout of mobile broadband networks and the increasing affordability of smartphones indicate that this situation is changing rapidly. Africa’s mobile phone market has rapidly expanded to become larger than either the EU or the United States with some 650 million subscribers. According to the ITU, there were about 100 million smartphone users in 2013 with the number set to
double to 200 million users in the next four years.

In Africa, the mobile is not just a telephone; it is a global address, a transaction device, and an identity marker for hundreds of millions of people and therefore presents media houses with an unprecedented opportunity for media in Africa to engage with citizens and provide interactive and customised news services. In Kenya, mobile subscriptions outnumber fixed lines by 107:1 while mobile Internet subscriptions are growing at 69 per cent each year. The latter comprise 99 per cent of the Internet connections, according to the Communications Commission of Kenya. Two-thirds of the 29 million mobile subscribers in Kenya use mobile money services, such as M-PESA, thereby leapfrogging traditional banking and enabling previously unbanked consumers access to an array of financial and payment services which they had not been able to receive. In Nigeria, more than 69 per cent of the population (100 million) are active mobile subscribers and outnumber fixed lines by almost 219:1.

Internet bandwidth has grown twenty-fold due to the laying of fibre optic cables across the continent providing Internet connection to serve a growing number of its citizens. According to the Internet World Statistics, this number is expected to reach 1.2 billion by 2019. There are over 167,335,676 internet users in the continent which represents 15 per cent of the population and only 7 per cent of the world’s total internet users. Only 7 per cent of all households in the continent have Internet access. According to the ITU, mobile broadband subscription which stands at more than 93 million subscriptions (11 per cent penetration) is growing at 41 per cent per year, making the continent one of the fastest-growing in the world in terms of connectivity and usage, especially as mobile telephony is more widespread than fixed line telephones. Broadband download speeds are low in comparison with other parts of the world and various attempts are being made to get more people in the continent online. East Africa was the last major region in the world without fibre-optic Internet access. This changed in 2009 with the landing of the first of first of three submarine fibre-optic broadband cables. Terrestrial cabling within and between many African
countries is, however, still being installed and the anticipated benefits of cheaper and faster Internet are yet to be realised.

Several other attempts being made to get more people in sub-Saharan Africa online include Google’s Project Loon, which is a network of balloons travelling on the edge of space and which is designed to connect people in rural and remote areas and help fill coverage gaps. The balloons float in the stratosphere, twice as high as airplanes and the weather. People connect to the balloon network using a special Internet antenna attached to their building. The signal bounces from this antenna up to the balloon network and then down to the global Internet on earth. Another intervention is Facebook’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s initiative to use solar-powered drones that can stay in the air for up to five years without needing to land and satellites that use lasers to deliver Internet connection.

Mobile phones, however, present many people with the opportunity to connect with the Internet. Africa is recording the fastest uptake of mobile phone subscriptions in the world with more than 72 per cent of the population owning a mobile phone. While a majority of these phones are considered basic, the development of smartphones specifically built for Africa (for example, the Hauwei4Africa) means that more and more people will be able to afford phones and benefit from the growing data connectivity across the continent. The mobile phone, which Tomi T. Ahonen (2008) describes as ‘the seventh mass media’ after print, sound recording, cinema, radio, television and the internet, raises the possibility that some countries may forego the democratisation of print and broadcast media and move straight to new forms of content on mobile platforms. The June 2014 Sub-Saharan Africa Ericsson Mobility Report suggests that the rapid expansion of 3G and 4G technologies is expected to fuel the ‘explosion’ of mobile data from the 76,000TB (terabyte) of data per month to 147,000 TB per month by 2019.

The rise of cheap smartphones will allow many people to access mobile Internet more cheaply and will impact greatly on newspapers. “Even if information technologies are being
developed in Africa to a substantial degree, they are still very much a minority phenomenon and while many African newspapers now have electronic editions (with all 54 African countries now having internet access) this does not mean that they reach more than a limited part of the population. The information and media gap between the information-strong and information-weak parts of the world is not going to disappear despite optimistic pronouncements of the Internet creating …democratic communication in the near future” (Ronning 2005,165).

The traditional newspaper business model that is based on advertising and circulation being the main source of revenue that drives the business is not going to be sustainable for long. The disruption that has caused newspapers in the US and Europe to decline is fast becoming a reality for newspapers in many sub-Saharan countries which are undergoing not only a computer and internet revolution at the same time but a growth in mobiles which will force newspapers to start considering ‘mobile first’ only strategies to be able to keep their readers.

The dilemma facing newspapers in these countries—how to reach new audiences and make their free online product profitable in the face of reduced advertising and circulation—is a problem which independent newspapers in sub-Saharan Africa must start to address if they are not to be caught off guard by the changing media environment. A survey by WAN/IFRA indicates that the dilemma of making money from their online presence is something that newspapers in emerging democracies including countries in sub-Saharan Africa are also grappling with. According to the survey, 36 per cent of the print newspapers in emerging democracies reported no Internet revenue in 2013 compared to 6.2 per cent of print newspapers in the developed markets. And even where the newspapers are making money from their digital edition, this is less than 10 per cent of the total revenue. Newspapers therefore have to develop an advertising system that integrates online advertising with other marketing communication efforts including sales promotions. They must have a dedicated sales team to sell online and even mobile advertising if they
are to get the most out of their online and mobile presence.

Mobile Internet advertising (which includes non-Internet-related means such as texts, MMS and tags on a ‘please call me’ message) allows advertisers to target the banner, the region, the operating system, the handset, the handset feature and much more—ensuring less wastage for the advertiser and giving a better return on investment. The mobile advertising trends which are emerging in Europe and the US should, however, not be used to explain or project what will happen in Africa since the market and consumption habits are likely to be very different. Lack of precise market data makes it difficult for both advertisers and media organisations to come up with innovative strategies to meet the different needs of their audiences.

For example, it would be futile for media houses to put out multi-media content on mobile since it would require at least a minimum of a 3G smartphone and high download speeds to connect with the reader. Considering that more than half the people who have cellphones are not necessarily connected to the electricity grid, media houses and advertisers therefore have to put out content that can be easily and cheaply accessed by a simple feature phone which ensures that the battery lasts longer and requires less resources.

As data gets cheaper across the continent, access to mobile content through mobile TV, video, social media is expected to strengthen Africa's bond to mobiles. However, mobile Internet advertising is yet to be fully utilised as a marketing tool. Research conducted by Informa Telecoms & Media, an African Internet and media firm, suggests revenues generated by mobile advertising could reach almost US$1.3bn by 2016. African mobile ad revenues hit US$136m in Internet search, display, mobile apps, downloads and streaming advertisements in 2012. The newspapers that are making money from mobiles are those with large volumes which are enough to attract advertisers or big enough to get higher premium income from such services as news alerts.
Aggregating audiences and selling them to advertisers is one way of newspapers monetising their online presence. There are various tools which can be used to target advertising to those who visit a newspaper website based on the information collated from their online habits, preferences and other personal information which they put out there. And unlike advertising in newspapers which is generally targeted at a heterogeneous mass based on basic demographic data, online advertising can be more targeted, measured and tracked for impact. However, advertising on print advertising still retains its importance because of its tangibility and staying power—internet ads can disappear into cyberspace instantaneously while the print product is a physical thing; its credibility (pop-up ads and banner ads can create the fear of spam and viruses which makes people afraid to click on them); its capacity to engage; and the use of QR (Quick Response codes) can bridge the gap between print and the web.

Most mobile phone users are used to paying for services received on their phones including news which are charged at a premium rate (a fraction higher than normal SMS rates) which, when seen in terms of mass volume, become revenue. The premium rate is prohibitively high for many people, and especially those in the low economic bracket. Apart from connecting with readers, mobile allows newspapers to push other content such as horoscopes, sports, celebrity news, relationships etc. as well as location-based content e.g. a mobile city guide which serves as a sub-category of a media company’s website, a list of current events and a link to newspaper reviews or reports of the events, reviews or profiles.

However, the premium SMS model has several disadvantages including the rise in the use of Twitter, which is increasingly being used to break news. Most newspapers end up keeping only a fraction of the money charged for such alerts with VAS aggregators (Value Added Service providers) and the mobile phone providers take the lion’s share (usually between 50% and 70%) of revenues generated and after government taxes. Opportunity also exists in newspapers using Interactive Voice response to
reach audiences who are illiterate and are not able to use or send SMS. Such a reader would be able to dial a specific short code to listen to content of choice such as news headlines, sports, etc.

With mobile Internet likely to be the game changer in the continent, will media houses have to adjust their news production system to accommodate a ‘mobile first’ newsroom? One of the biggest challenges for independent media organisations is finding an affordable publishing system that can deliver to all print, broadcast and digital platforms. One alternative is for independent media houses to use open source software that can be adapted to meet individual newsroom organisation, content delivery and business strategy. Such software should be driven by editorial, not technological demands.

Newspapers can also introduce pay walls to monetise their unique and prime content that cannot be found anywhere else. This means that journalists have to develop content which is of value such as in-depth analysis, commentaries and investigative stories. Newspapers can install either a ‘hard’ pay wall which means that readers can only access the content if they are paid subscribers or a ‘soft’ pay wall where readers are limited to a certain number of stories before they are required to subscribe or a mixed pay wall—where certain content is restricted to paying subscribers while leaving most of the content free to all. This kind of ‘metered’ pay wall balances the need for newspapers to put their content in front of as many readers as possible while attempting to persuade those who like the content to pay for it through subscription. The challenge with this is deciding which content is most effective as a marketing tool and which content people will actually be prepared to pay for. Newspapers can also adopt a model where foreign readers are charged for accessing premium content and archives while giving it for free to local users.

With improved mobile Internet connections and faster Internet broadband speeds, newspapers must be ready to integrate and make use of content being generated by citizen journalists. As online media thinker and New York
University Professor Jay Rosen explained in his Pressthink blog back in 2008, “When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that’s citizen journalism.” Fackson Banda, in his exploratory study ‘Citizen Journalism and Democracy in Africa’ describes citizen journalism as being “a rapidly evolving form of journalism where common citizens take the initiative to report news or express views about happenings within their community.” He further defines citizen journalists as ‘institutional’ in reference to the online community that newspaper websites have developed which allows journalists to interact with readers and allows the latter to give feedback, comments and even criticism of the work done by professional journalists. Most newspapers have incorporated social media tools and user generated content on their sites that provide links at the end of every story or opinion piece for readers to comment, share, or contribute content. They have also established themselves in social media to get people to like and follow them on their news websites.

Banda describes the second type of citizen journalists as ‘non-institutional’ and refers to individuals who produce content and share it with friends and family on social networking platforms but not necessarily with newspapers. Citizen journalism can contribute a lot to democracy by encouraging citizens to participate in holding their government to account for example, through whistle blowing while the anonymity of the internet gives those living under authoritarian regimes an opportunity to tell their own stories without fear of retribution, especially in situations where governments control media outlets where such stories are unlikely to be published. Banda, however, cautions about what he describes as the “utopic ideals’ expected from citizen journalists and what actually happens in reality. He cites a study by Last Moyo (‘Blogging down a dictator in Zimbabwe: Human rights, citizen journalists and the right to communicate in Zimbabwe’ published by the University of Witwatersrand, 2011) which revealed that the people’s right to communicate is hampered by unequal access to the infrastructure which means that only the elite few have access to the internet and are therefore not
popular or democratic. Similarly, the anonymity of the Internet has given rise to hoaxes, false alarms and has in some instances, been susceptible for use to spread propaganda by government and politicians.

Various scholars (Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Deuze et al, 2007; Domingo et al., 2008, Moyo, 2009; Deuze, 2005, 2008; Robinson 2007; Bruns 2006, 2007) see citizen journalism as presenting challenges but also opportunities for traditional journalists. They see citizen journalists as not only challenging the professional journalistic norms and ethics but also undermining the journalists’ gatekeeping function and upsetting their long-held role of being the sole determinants of what the public hears, sees and reads about the world (Deuze, 2005, p 451). This belief has been challenged by the rise of citizen journalists and bloggers, some of whom have the expertise and knowledge of a subject which many journalists may not have. Some of the notable bloggers who have become regular columnists in print newspapers in Kenya include former anti-corruption permanent secretary John Githongo and strategic communications consultant, writer and political cartoonist, Patrick Gathaara.

Citizens’ engagement in journalism comes in different forms: it might be purely accidental or, in contrast, a deliberate pursuit of advocacy or spring from community or grassroots activism. The accidental journalists are people who are caught unexpectedly in the middle of an event and take photos or videos and upload them on their social networking sites or news websites. One example was the January 2011 graphic photos taken by a Nairobi motorist stuck in a traffic jam which showed police executing suspects who had surrendered and were lying on the ground.

Advocacy journalism is intentionally and transparent in its religious, political, social or economic bias but is not propagandistic reporting. An example of this are the "radio ambassadors" in Rwanda who call to tip journalists off about news from different locales in the country. Citizen’s
involvement was also central to the development of the SMS-based crowd sourcing platform developed during 2007/8 in response to a media blackout imposed by the government. Other crowd-sourcing tools developed to get citizens participate in their own governance include Mzalendo (patriot in Kiswahili) that was set up to monitor the performance of MPs and Huduma (service in Kiswahili) where citizens send in reports on the performance of public services in their district which are then mapped on the Huduma site and the responsible authority is identified. The I Paid A Bribe website which attracted a lot of public attention has since lost its appeal due to the failure by the authorities to rein in the petty corruption endemic at all levels of the society.

The impact that these innovations have had on mainstream media has been minimal. An attempt to link tech innovators and journalists with the aim of producing content was the subject of an experiment coordinated by London School of Economics researcher Nicholas Benquista and six Kenyan journalists. The Networked News Lab aimed at giving journalists access to enrich their news articles through the use of crowd sourcing tools, social media as well as connecting with citizen journalists, mining data sets to produce content among others.

However, the project has had little impact on journalism in Kenya due to what Benquista notes (Networked News Lab briefing note, www.networkednews.org) were the inherent weaknesses in the manner in which the experiment was rolled out, the mistrust that journalists and the techies had about each other with the former believing the latter had a hidden agenda, the lack of clarity as to which role each had in the media environment and the failure by the techies to understand the nature and challenges faced by journalists in the course of their day to day work. The study, however, indicated the potential that exists for journalists to innovate and use the new media technologies to add value to the stories they write can reshape how the industry develops.
The significance of citizen journalism cannot be overlooked but the challenge is how newspapers are integrating the content generated by its readers, whether as additional ‘eye witness accounts’ or getting news tips from social networking sites. The Star has a free citizen journalism application, Star Reports, which allows readers to send in their own news reports, news tips, audio or even video to the newspaper using cellphones. In Ghana, the Accra-based radio station Joy FM has incorporated citizen journalism as part of its strategy and launched its own citizen journalism platform, ‘You Report’. Sahara Reporters is one of the leading citizen journalism website which has about 450 Nigerians regularly generating content and another 5,000 who contribute through SMS texts, upload video, photos and audio.

In order to enhance citizen journalism and to improve the relevance and impact of news media, the African Media Initiative organized the first ever Africa News Innovation Challenge that led to the development of several tools and strategies using the Internet, mobile platforms, data driven journalism, computer assisted reporting among others. Among the winners were a mobile app developed in Ghana to assist citizens to act on investigative reports published in the media; Citizen Desk, a mobile platform for the verification, aggregation and publishing of content generated by citizen journalists; CorruptionNET, another mobile platform to assist citizens to report on corruption. Others are: FlashCast, which is yet another open-source mobile platform that is used to beam news to commuters in matatus (mini-bus taxis) who can then engage in a conversation about the news with other commuters in other matatus; the Listening Post which will be Africa’s first social media-focused newsroom. It will produce, commission and sell crowd sourced photos and news content generated solely by citizen reporters using a customised Storyful dashboard.

The technological revolution has now made it possible for one journalist to work in print, television, and radio and also on the Internet. This means that newsrooms have to be
converged and requires journalists to have multiple skills to be able to deliver for all these different platforms. In this changing working environment, media houses have to be able to provide the training required to make the adjustment.

These technologies have, however, brought about tensions between traditional and online journalism. While the former has a culture of valuing accuracy, verification of information before publication, honesty, truth, balance and impartiality and respect for the autonomy of ordinary people, the latter seems to place more value on speed, partiality and post-publication corrections of any factual errors that might arise from the haste to be the first to break the news. “There are more challenges around the ethical implications of digital media - most media houses are still getting their heads around these issues, and with the rapid developments in digital technologies things do sometimes get a bit messy,” notes Zimbabwean media scholar Dr Hayes Mawindi in reference to the ethical and professional challenges posed by digital media such as plagiarism, ‘arm chair journalism’ and ‘moonlighting’ among others.(Mawindi et al., 2013)

The new technologies provide newspapers with the opportunity to use multimedia content on their websites as well as interactive graphics, data visualisation and video which not only serve to inform readers but also engage them in a better manner than newspapers. Video also provides newspapers with an opportunity to attract advertising for their online editions.

Newspapers also have to contend with the challenge of online publications that might not only rival the print but even the online publication of established titles. The cost of establishing an online newspaper is much lower than that of putting out a print publication. However, it does not guarantee commercial success as Africa’s first Pulitzer Prize winner Dele Olojede found out when he attempted to establish a hybrid print/online publication that had to close after two years, partly because he could not get advertising support from pro-government agencies. However, South
Africa’s Mail and Guardian online daily, which was the first internet news publication in Africa, has managed to survive and continues to attract new readers and still averages 50,000 print copies per week.

The Internet makes it easier to promote democratic ideas and counter propaganda against the authorities though many governments still try to exert their control.

From the discussion above, it is clear that mobile phones are the new talking drums in Africa and present the most effective way of connecting with each other and with the rest of the world. The challenge lies with finding profitable ways of integrating the new media technologies with traditional media. As digital media consultant Russell Southwood notes, no-one has yet launched a mobile news product to take advantage of the considerable number of smartphone and feature phone users.
5. Conclusions

The evolution of the independent press in sub-Saharan Africa has gone through several stages since the establishment of the first newspaper in the 1800s. From being tools of mobilising the citizens in the struggle for independence from colonialism, these newspapers were co-opted by the newly independent governments and became the mouthpieces of authoritarian regimes which suppressed opposition or critical views until the 1990s with the advent of multi-partyism in many countries and a relaxation of government control of the media.

To draw out some of the conclusions of this paper, I conducted a survey with 20 pre-eminent African media scholars, practitioners and policy makers from different countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Fifteen out of the 20 responded to my survey and their responses are incorporated into this discussion. I sought their views on what they viewed as the greatest challenges facing private newspapers in the continent. The survey was done through a questionnaire which I developed and which was administered in the final week of June 2014. All respondents responded to all the questions and some were also able to give additional insights into what they considered to be the major challenges.

Apart from the challenges, I also sought the respondents’ views on other issues relevant to the development of private newspapers in the continent, the challenges and opportunities presented by the new media technologies such as the internet, and the exponential growth of mobile phone use in the continent and whether newspapers were doing enough to meet the opportunities presented by the rapid growth in mobile phone connectivity. The questions also sought to get their views on what they considered to be the opportunities which existed for private media to exploit the explosive growth in mobile phones in the continent as well as the relatively slower growth of the internet. The questions also sought their views on the other aspects of media
development such as cross-media ownership and its impact on diversity; whether limits should be set on media ownership either by governments, foreign and/or local investors; and the dominance of one media house in a region (as happens in East Africa with the Nation Media Group) and what this means for media diversity and the views of marginalised communities, interests and issues.

According to the survey, while political threats hindered the establishment and growth of independent newspapers in the period before the late 1990s and still, to some extent, hinder the development of newspapers, economic constraints now present the biggest hurdle. Of those surveyed, 86% of them cited the economic climate such as lack of access to finance, punitive tax laws, high costs of materials, small and undeveloped advertising markets and lack of reliable industry data among others as being a hindrance to the development of independent print newspapers.

More than half the respondents (53%) cited legal or regulatory mechanisms as an issue of concern. But as noted by African media researcher and author, Dr Mabweazara: “The scenario is more complicated than this. The key point is that as much as we talk of sub-Saharan Africa as homogeneous, there are significant differences across countries: South Africa for instance stands out as an economic island in the same manner as Kenya, and a greater part of East Africa.”

While many countries in the continent have constitutions that guarantee freedom of the press and freedom of expression, the authorities have found ways of clawing back the gains that these countries have made by introducing new legislation. In Kenya, the media is considered very robust and vibrant but the continued existence of criminal libel and defamation laws, the decade-long reluctance by the country’s Parliament to enact the freedom of access law and the introduction of new laws such as the Kenya Information and Communication Act (which seeks to introduce government controls on content and self-regulation) are examples of the challenges ahead. Rwanda presents an interesting counterpoint to this argument in that, while the country has introduced reforms in the media
and even enacted a freedom of access law, the media there cannot in any way be compared to Kenya in terms of robustness of its criticism of the establishment or exposure of corruption in high places. The restraint is self-imposed on the part of the media which has yet to redeem itself from its role in the 1994 genocide. Removing legal and regulatory hurdles that exist (e.g. the exorbitant Sh1m publishing bond that one is required to pay before establishing a newspaper in Kenya) can go a long way towards the establishment of independent media.

Trevor Ncube, the Chief Executive of South Africa’s Mail and Guardian and publisher of The Standard and The Zimbabwe Independent, cites political pressures topping the list of the challenges for the development of independent newspapers. The latter two newspapers are highly critical of President Robert Mugabe who has in the past made several attempts to close them down. In Kenya, the government-sanctioned raids on the Standard Group’s newspaper and television offices in March 2006, the invasion and occupation of the Monitor newspaper newsroom by Ugandan police in 2013, are all pointers to the unease with which the political establishment and indeed, governments have in allowing an unfettered media sector.

Pressure from advertisers—whether corporate or government—presents the biggest challenge to the editorial independence of newspapers. It is not uncommon for media owners and managers to curry favour with major companies or government agencies to try and get advertising contracts. In such instances, commercial interests override editorial independence. Advertising pressures range from companies using their financial clout to influence editorial decisions to paying journalists and editors to ensure positive coverage. For example, it is rare that the newspapers in Kenya carry any negative reports about the major ad spenders such as Safaricom, Kenya Revenue Authority, Kenya Power company or the East African Breweries. The fear is of losing their jobs if such advertisers pull out. According to the survey, 10 out of the 15 respondents cited economic pressures as a threat to editorial independence. The incessant drive from the investors and/or shareholders to have a return on their
investment puts a lot of pressure on the news managers to protect the business interests over and above editorial concerns.

Additional pressure comes from politicians who attempt, and in some instances, succeed in interfering with the way in which a story is angled. In Kenya, some of the media owners who have strong political affiliations have sometimes become co-opted into politics and are known to influence editorial policy in favour of their candidate during elections or in support/against a policy.

The growing popularity of social media is one of the opportunities that independent media organisations can exploit for revenue generation and financial sustainability. According to the survey’s respondents, news media organisations in sub-Saharan Africa need to introduce multi-media operations in their news gathering processes and integrate citizen journalism in their strategies if they are to remain successful. Prof Anton Harber, founding editor of the Mail and Guardian newspaper and adjunct professor of Journalism at the University of Witwatersrand, says additional opportunities lie in the adoption of new media technologies. Journalists therefore have to acquire the skill to present the content on the internet in a different way from what they do for newspapers. The new technologies present new challenges for journalists particularly on verification of information received from citizen journalists or online. “There are more challenges around the ethical implications of digital media which most media houses are still getting their heads around. With the rapid development in digital technologies, things are getting a bit messy. What, for instance, is the sourcing routines emerging on social media platforms? What’s acceptable and what’s not?” poses Dr Mabweazara.

Internet connectivity is the main challenge that digital media presents to the print industry. While undersea fibre optic cables have ensured that most countries connect to the Internet, a number of them have yet to complete building the backbone infrastructure required to provide Internet access to those living in rural areas. “The main challenges relate to issues that lie largely beyond the control
of the industry: connectivity and technological adaptability; technical capacity; the relatively small size of most media markets, and resource constraints,” says Eric Chinje, the chairman of African Media Development Initiative.

Academic researcher and digital media expert, Indra de Lanerolle, also cites Internet connectivity and multi-media operations as the greatest challenges that new media present to newspapers. In his study conducted in 12 countries as part of the World Internet Project (The rise of social media in Africa August 2013) de Lanerolle indicates that the number of people using their mobile phones to read newspapers is growing. He cautions against the uncritical assumptions that the disruption caused by new technologies in the West will affect the print industry in sub-Saharan Africa in the same way. He argues that internet-enabled mobile phones will provide access to the kind of independent journalism that many people in sub-Saharan Africa have been denied. He writes that “Mobile wireless networks may be the first distribution channels that offer the possibility of diverse news and information sources available to the majority of Africans and people are moving to it in part because of the failures of the journalism channels of the past and present.”

Media consultant for Africa Projects at Bloomberg, Kieran Baker, sees data management as topping the list of the challenges that digital media presents to the newspaper industry in sub-Saharan Africa. Dr George Ogola, senior lecturer in journalism at the School of Journalism and Digital Communication, University of Central Lancashire, sees the lack of audience research data as the biggest challenge. Data can come in from a variety of sources ranging from digital as well as traditional advertising, online registration gateways and social media platforms. This information can be used to identify what readers like to read online, the sections they visit frequently and their implied behaviour or preferences which can be useful for targeted advertising.

The respondents noted the failure by newspapers to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the exponential
growth in mobile telephony and especially mobile Internet. The possibility of running targeted advertising or even relaying news of interest to specific mobile subscribers is an opportunity not being exploited. Concerns about the uneven revenue sharing emanating from high SMS and data download costs that benefits mobile phone subscribers over and above the media houses needs to be addressed. This might mean lobbying for a change in the revenue-sharing model, either through legislation or by reaching a consensus with all the mobile phone operators.

In order to ensure that diversity in society is respected within the industry, and avoid what Eric Chinje describes as the “capture of the national media space by a few”, governments should set limits on the concentration of ownership within a specific type of media as well as cross-media ownership where one company has stakes in different types of media. The ownership of a large proportion of the media in any country by an individual, company or government may result not only in less diverse opinions but also block or drown out information that is of public interest and interfere with the editorial independence of such media.

“Freedom of the press belongs to the man who owns one” is the aphorism made famous by the late New Yorker essayist A.J. Liebling. It captures concerns by some media scholars (for example, Djankov et al) who draw a correlation between concentrated mass media ownership and the lack of diversity of opinion, the reluctance by owners/publishers to pursue socially valuable journalism in their focus for the ‘bottom line’. Since advertisers tend to choose large conglomerates, the survival of smaller competitors becomes more precarious. The lack of competition may lead to a reduced level of innovation and can lead to higher prices for consumers.

Within the African context, the African Declaration on the Principles of Press Freedom states that it is the responsibility of governments to prevent media concentration but they should ensure that such measures do not inhibit the development of the media sector. In Kenya, the market is dominated by a handful of major
groups —primarily the Nation Media Group and the Standard Media Group but also the Royal Media Group and Radio Africa - which have a combination of print and broadcast media, distribution and publishing. “The media in Kenya have been moving towards monopoly, concentrating ownership in a few hands and producing duplicative and biased content. A few corporate organisations and individuals own most of the media houses across the country. This environment, in which only a handful of players are shaping the media ownership structure, is reinforcing barriers to market entry in the media sector; major media houses are using methods ranging from interference with licensing procedures to monopolising advertising and distribution networks.” (Allen, Gagliardone, 2011).

However, in many other countries excluding Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana, the media sector is too fragmented which also impacts the freedom of expression as such titles lack the resources and staff to carry out proper journalistic research. “Like most print media in the world, the Africa print media is struggling to survive but the fact that newspapers in many countries in Africa, including Ghana, are set up as cottage industries rather than sound industries makes their survival even more precarious,” asserts Prof Audrey Gadzekpo, past director of the School of Communication Studies at the University of Ghana. Indeed, compared to other markets in the world, the African media industry is still very small and is at the stage where it is developing audiences and advertisers. Since much of Africa is media-poor, it means consumers have little or no exposure to a wide range of media products available from which they can develop a preference and thereby present a potential advertising market. Lack of audience research and data means that most of the time newspapers are ‘guessing’ what is of interest to their readers. Invariably, the content is more directed at the urban-based upper and lower middle class which excludes a large fraction of the population.

Setting limits on foreign media ownership is also a hotly contested topic. In Kenya, attempts by the government to set limits on foreign ownership of media was defeated by the
aggressive lobbying put up by the Kenya Media Owners Association, some of whose members have influence on the political climate.

The survey indicates that finances present a formidable challenge in the establishment of independent newspapers. Many governments limit foreign ownership of the media in order to protect their national culture and identity, so they allow foreign investors in the media sector obviously with some guidelines and conditionalities. For example, in South Africa, ‘foreign persons’ are barred from exercising direct or indirect control over a private broadcasting licensee, from owning more than 20% of the financial or voting interests in a licensee or from holding more than 20% of the directorships. Mathatha Tsedu, manager of Media 24’s Journalism Academy, states cultural interests alone should not be used to limit or bar foreign ownership of media: “The reasons must be overall national and public interest. In situations where foreign ownership controls vast areas of opinion forming media outlets, the danger of such outlets being used to push foreign interests is always existent. This is not always the case but limitation would guard against such possible abuse.”

The continent is very far from having the ubiquitous 24/7 media commodity that is prevalent in most Western countries. However, as Islam (2002) points out, the three most critical attributes of an effective media sector— independence, quality and reach— still present formidable but not unsurmountable challenges for independent newspapers. Some of these challenges are unique to the continent and even to specific countries and therefore demand home-grown solutions that take into consideration these differences or peculiarities. For independent newspapers to grow and develop, they must be free from any control; be supported by an adequate legal framework that ensures freedom of speech, freedom of expression and access to information; have plurality in its news sources; maintain professional and ethical standards; have adequate reach across the population; and be able to provide the public with reliable, high quality content. Newspaper firms should also be financially viable and capable of paying
competitive salaries to their journalists. And as far as the new media technologies are concerned, media houses in the continent can learn from the West where the demise of the newspaper as a mass medium is seen as a foregone conclusion, and avoid such missteps as ignoring the opportunities presented by these technologies. Solutions to these challenges cannot be addressed on the assumption that ‘one size fits all’ as these countries are at different phases of their democratisation which has a direct impact on the development of the media, and especially independent newspapers. The challenge for media scholars, innovators, and policy makers is therefore to come up with country-specific solutions and not attempt a ‘cut-and-paste’ prescription.
Bibliography


Banda, Fackson (2010), Citizen Journalism & Democracy in Africa: An Exploratory Study (South Africa: Highway Africa).


Berger, Guy (February 2002), 'Theorizing the Media—Democracy Relationship in Southern Africa', International Communication Gazette, 64, 21-45.


Elizabeth, Barratt and Guy, Berger (2007), '50 Years of Journalism: African media since Ghana's Independence', (Johannesburg, South


Iyengar, Shanto, Donald R. Kinder (2010), 'The Agenda Setting Effect', in Shanto Iyengar, Donald R. Kinder (ed.), News That Matters:
Television and American Opinion (Chicago: University of Chicago), 16-33.


Kalyongo, Yusuf (2010), 'Media Accountability and Political Interest in East Africa'.


Stockmann, Daniela (April 2006), 'Media trust in China ', Midwest Political Science Association meetings (Chicago, IL).


