

An Analysis of the Changing Issues in Democratic Assignments for Kenyan Journalists

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Abstract

The prime obligation of journalists is to act as public trustees on issues pertaining to democracy. They should agitate for rights for all members of the society and act as scrutinizers to those holding official positions in government. However, the journalistic work is threatened by political influences, the emergence of online journalism and citizen journalism which the journalists have no control over. This changing environment has brought a new threat to issues on democratic assignments and professional identity. Given these contextual trends coupled with the structural changes in journalism as a practice, this study explored the possible changes in the journalism profession. The study sought to establish the changes in professional ideals of the journalists" with a focus on the democratic assignments. The study was carried out in Nairobi County and targeted journalists in selected media houses in Kenya. The total number of respondents were 314. The study used mixed method approach. Survey technique was employed to generate both quantitative and qualitative data. The data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. The study findings showed that the ideals of scrutiny and explanation were consistently supported by journalists in different social groups and media houses thus indicating a show of homogeneity. This consolidation around a few central values that had long been acknowledged as legitimate in the field was a confirmation of adherence to the ideology that guards the profession. It is a sign of putting their foot down to protect their identity at a time when everything seems to be changing in the field of communication. The special role of journalists as pure collectors of information is no longer tenable at the moment since even ordinary citizen can do the same. The gathering around scrutiny and explanation seems only natural in this case because these ideals focus on what is considered "the true essence of journalism".

Key Words: Journalism, Democracy, Identity, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

The prime obligation of a journalist is to act as a public trustee on issues pertaining to democracy. They are supposed to agitate for rights for all members of the society and act as scrutinizers to those holding official positions in government. Although the greater part of the Kenyan media firms are owned by entrepreneurs who are largely driven by the profit motive, journalists are still expected to safeguard the interests of the public. A government whose ideology is founded on the principles of democracy is therefore duty bound to support and protect the media in its endeavors.

Article 34 of the Kenyan constitution clearly outlines the noble role that the journalists should play in promotion of democracy. They are supposed to interpret and explain complicated issues in order to assist the public have the necessary knowledge to make rational opinions especially on political matters (Constitution of Kenya, 2010). Journalists are also supposed to act as mediators of communication by providing avenues in which the opinions of the public are heard through healthy debates.

All these functions in a nutshell provide what journalists, politicians and citizens regard as the main tasks of the media in Kenya. However, media houses by virtue of their persuasions are not bound to implement these values to the letter but journalists strive to incorporate them in their professional identity.

Wiik (2010) describes the professional identity of journalists as assuming democratic shape of the present and immediate political environment. Wiik (2010) posits that democratic role of journalism may indeed differ depending on the democratic model prevailing: participatory, liberal or oriented towards competition. The common factor in all representative models, however, is that they include normative demands on journalism (Stromback *et al.*, 2006) to guard public interests in relation to political power. In addition to scrutiny, journalism is also expected to provide information and a forum for debate. These tasks demand extensive autonomy and integrity on the part of news producers both individually and

institutionally (Stromback *et al*, 2006). The increasingly consumerist society and tougher competition in media markets has accentuated the difficulties in achieving these high ideals, but has at the same time opened up new needs for audience contact and feedback (Anderson, & Bayrn, 2004). The public sphere is changing, and the role of news media is changing too.

Globalization is said to create an intellectual and cultural elite of mobile knowledge workers, whereas the majority remain immobile and dependent service workers (Angell & Heslop, 1995). This is also visible in journalism. Expanding applications of different journalistic skills and personnel, accompanied by far-reaching reorganizations of journalistic labour, contributes to the creation of new hierarchies. Ursell (2004) divides the journalistic field into three levels: top-layer journalists that may indeed be regarded as involved in the rule setting in the field and enjoying some mobility and autonomy, while the bottom layer comprises replaceable production journalists. The majority of journalists land somewhere in between; they hold reasonably secure terms of employment, but find their autonomy drastically curtailed by an existence as corporate employees.

It is against this background of threatened profession of journalism that the study was carried to establish the changes in professional ideals of the journalists, with a focus on the democratic assignments.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A mixed method research design was used to undertake this study. This was done to integrate both the quantitative data and qualitative data so as to get quality data. The population of this study consisted of all the journalists in Kenya which was 23,019. In this study the stratified randomised sampling was used to collect data from the different media houses. Four media houses, which included KBC, Nation, Royal media services and Standard media group, were purposively sampled based on their wide audience reach and influence in Kenya's public sphere as well as their accessibility since they all operated in Nairobi. They were then divided into 4 strata. Random sampling was then used to select journalists from each of the strata. A total of 314 journalist participated in the study. The data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study first sought to determine the strongest ideals in journalism. This was done by comparing the mean of the ideals. As indicated in tables 1, 2 and 3, the ideals of scrutiny, explanation and letting different opinions be heard dominated the professional imagination of Kenyan journalists by attaining nearly full support from all journalists regardless of gender, education or organization affiliation. The results further illustrated that the ideal of scrutiny was ranked the highest and therefore regarded as the most important journalistic task while the ideal of explaining complicated events to the audience was valued as the second most important. The ideal of letting different opinions be heard was indeed valued as important by journalists, but yet was somewhat less prioritized than scrutiny and information. It is also worth noting that the differences in terms of agreement regarding the three ideals were minimal.

Table 1. Homogeneity in support of the scrutiny ideal

	Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent
Male	4.7%	7.3%	22.0%	32.5%	33.5%
Female	9.6%	12.2%	21.7%	33.0%	23.5%
With journalistic qualifications	6.7%	9.3%	18.9%	32.6%	32.6%
Without journalistic qualifications	5.6%	8.3%	38.9%	33.3%	13.9%
Mainstream publications	4%	8%	20%	36%	31%
Mainstream private broadcast	4%	7%	19%	33%	36%
Mainstream public broadcast	5%	13%	29%	34%	18%
Small FM stations	9%	8%	28%	27%	28%

Hard news	9.2%	5.3%	25.0%	28.9%	31.6%
Soft news	4.9%	9.8%	24.4%	31.7%	29.3%
General information	5.8%	10.9%	17.4%	35.5%	30.4%

Table 2. Homogeneity in support of the ideal of explanation

	Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Total
Gender						
Male	3.7%	7.9%	19.5%	40.0%	28.9%	100%
Female	4.3%	6.0%	14.7%	39.7%	35.3%	100%
Education						
With journalistic qualifications	3.7%	6.3%	16.3%	40.0%	33.7%	100%
Without journalistic qualifications	5.6%	13.9%	27.8%	33.3%	19.4%	100%
Organization						
Mainstream publications	4	6	16	41	34	100
Mainstream private broadcast	3	4	15	44	33	100
Mainstream public broadcast	5	16	16	30	32	100
Small FM stations	4	3	23	41	29	100
Area of coverage						
Hard news	2.6%	6.6%	18.4%	35.5%	36.8%	100%
Soft news	5.0%	5.0%	17.5%	38.8%	33.8%	100%
General information	4.3%	9.3%	15.7%	41.4%	29.3%	100%

Table 3. Homogeneity in support of letting different opinions be heard

	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Total
Gender					
Male	1.6%	10.5%	38.4%	49.5%	100.0%
Female	2.6%	9.4%	37.6%	50.4%	100.0%
Education					
With journalistic qualification	1.8%	9.2%	36.2%	52.8%	100.0%
Without journalistic qualification	2.8%	13.9%	52.8%	30.6%	100.0%
Organization					
Mainstream publications	4.2	13.0	36.2	46.7	100
Mainstream private broadcast	2.8	9.7	38.6	48.9	100
Mainstream public broadcast	2.6	5.3	44.7	47.4	100
Small FM stations	0.4	6.7	43.6	49.4	100
Area of coverage					
Hard news	2.6%	10.5%	32.9%	53.9%	100.0%
Soft news	2.4%	6.1%	39.0%	52.4%	100.0%
General information	1.4%	12.2%	36.7%	49.6%	100.0%

Gender and Democratic Assignments

Social identities based on gender are controversial and have been widely discussed in a number of studies related to professionalism. Research has been criticized for reflecting masculine values and presenting male experiences as universal. Wiik (2010) argues that men have an advantage over women in the way they are perceived by the general public.

Being male is unquestionably an advantage in most situations, while female gender on the other hand may be regarded as negative capital- a debt, because it forces the capital holder to work extra hard to make up for it (p. 174)

The study findings indicated a strong support for scrutiny from both gender but women valued the ideals more than men (Table 4). This opinion was strongly shared by majority of veteran journalists who participated in this study. This means that while this ideal was getting consolidated, the gendered dimension of journalism was becoming more accentuated. The gender gap was also evident for the two ideals as women valued the two ideals more than men.

Table 4. Support for the ideals of scrutiny, explanation and letting different opinions be heard in control of gender

	Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Total
Scrutiny						
Male	4.7%	7.3%	22.0%	32.5%	33.5%	100.0%
Female	9.6%	12.2%	21.7%	33.0%	23.5%	100.0%
Difference	4.9%	4.9%	0.3%	0.5%	10.0%	0.0%
Explanation						
Male	3.7%	7.9%	19.5%	40.0%	28.9%	100%
Female	4.3%	6.0%	14.7%	39.7%	35.3%	100%
Difference	0.6%	1.9%	4.8%	0.3%	6.4%	0.0%
Letting opinions be heard						
Male	-	1.6%	10.5%	38.4%	49.5%	100%
Female	-	2.6%	9.4%	37.6%	50.4%	100%
Difference		1.0%	-1.1%	-0.8%	0.9%	0.0%

Education and Democratic Assignments

Table 5 shows variations in perceptions on the three ideals in relation to level of education.

Table 5. Support for the ideals of scrutiny, explanation and letting different opinions be heard in control for journalistic qualifications

	Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Total
Scrutiny						
With journalistic qualifications	6.7%	9.3%	18.9%	32.6%	32.6%	100.0%
Without journalistic qualifications	5.6%	8.3%	38.9%	33.3%	13.9%	100.0%
Explanation						
With journalistic qualifications	3.7%	6.3%	16.3%	40.0%	33.7%	100%
Without journalistic qualifications	5.6%	13.9%	27.8%	33.3%	19.4%	100%
Letting opinions be heard						
With journalistic qualification		1.8%	9.2%	36.2%	52.8%	100.0%
Without journalistic qualification		2.8%	13.9%	52.8%	30.6%	100.0%

According to the study findings as illustrated in Table 5, education stood out as a very important determinant regarding perceptions of the ideals of scrutiny and explanation. When this was correlated with the time each one of them joined the profession, journalists who held formal qualifications supported the ideal to a larger extent than those without qualifications in journalism. It is therefore safe to say that journalists with formal qualifications support the ideals of scrutiny and explanation more than those without professional qualifications. However, formal qualifications do not play the same role regarding

the ideal of letting different opinions be heard. In this case, it is gender instead that makes the difference as presented in Table 6.

Table 6 shows that women supported the ideals of scrutiny and explanation to a great extent than men did, regardless of their level of education. This was contrary to various empirical evidences regarding gender differences.

Table 6. Gender and Democratic Assignments

		Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Total
Scrutiny							
With qualification	Male	5.0%	7.5%	19.3%	31.7%	36.6%	100.0%
	Female	9.4%	12.3%	18.9%	34.9%	24.5%	100.0%
Without qualifications	Male	3.6%	7.1%	35.7%	39.3%	14.3%	100.0%
	Female	12.5%	12.5%	50.0%	12.5%	12.5%	100.0%
Explanation							
With qualification	Male	3.1%	6.9%	18.8%	40.6%	30.6%	100.0%
	Female	4.7%	5.6%	13.1%	39.3%	37.4%	100.0%
Without qualification	Male	7.1%	14.3%	25.0%	32.1%	21.4%	100.0%
	Female		12.5%	37.5%	37.5%	12.5%	100.0%
Letting opinion be heard							
With qualification	Male	-	1.3%	9.4%	36.9%	52.5%	100.0%
	Female	-	2.8%	9.3%	36.1%	51.9%	100.0%
Without qualification	Male	-	3.6%	14.3%	50.0%	32.1%	100.0%
	Female	-	-	12.5%	62.5%	25.0%	100.0%

Another important variable linked to the identity of journalists that this study envisioned to establish was age. It is widely assumed that younger journalists are more energetic, insightful and critical. The expectation therefore was that they were more likely to support the ideal of scrutiny more than the old generation. The results however were in sharp contrast to this perception. There were minimal differences associated with age regarding the ideals of scrutiny and explanation. However, clear distinction emerged regarding the ideal of scrutiny and explanation when age was aligned with level of education. This demonstrated that formally qualified journalists carried a more intense professional identity than those without professional qualifications.

Media Houses and Democratic Assignments

Hatch and Schultz (2004) pointed out the correlation between organizational identity and professional identity. The values and practices observed by journalists in an organization forms the culture and image of that organization. They argued that these two elements are significant in the formation of organization identity which may in some respects differ from professional identity.

This study sets to find out whether journalists working in different media houses exhibited different perceptions regarding the ideals of scrutiny, explanation and letting different opinions be heard. The study findings are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Support for the ideals of scrutiny, explanation and letting different opinions be heard in control of place of work

	Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Total
Scrutiny						
Mainstream publications	4.2%	7.9%	20.5%	36.3%	31.2%	100%
Mainstream private broadcast	3.9%	7.5%	19.2%	33.1%	36.4%	100%
Mainstream public broadcast	5.3%	13.2%	28.9%	34.2%	18.4%	100%
Small FM stations	9.2%	8.0%	28.0%	26.6%	28.2%	100%
Explanation						
Mainstream publications	3.50	6.15	15.70	41.15	33.50	100
Mainstream private broadcast	3.43	4.10	14.90	44.11	33.44	100
Mainstream public broadcast	5.41	16.22	16.22	29.73	32.43	100
Small FM stations	4.00	5.15	22.93	39.68	28.23	100
Letting opinion be heard						
Mainstream publications	0.0	4.2	13.0	36.2	46.7	100
Mainstream private broadcast	0.0	2.8	9.7	38.6	48.9	100
Mainstream public broadcast	0.0	2.6	5.3	44.7	47.4	100
Small FM stations	0.0	0.4	6.7	43.6	49.4	100

The findings as indicated in the Table 7 showed that journalists from the mainstream publications (*Daily Nation* and *Standard*) supported the ideals of scrutiny and explanation to a great extent than those from other media houses. This can be attributed to the fact these media houses have had a long tradition of investigative journalism that has indeed proved to be lucrative and in many ways they carry a tradition of scrutiny, drive and entrepreneurship. Those from the commercial radio FM stations showed relatively less support compared with the rest of the media houses. This was because majority of these media houses focused on celebrities and pure entertainment. However, journalists from different media houses had different opinions on the ideal of letting different opinions be heard. Controlling organizational differences in professional ideology against gender and education is challenging because material divided in so many groups, becomes unreliable.

Area of Coverage and Democratic Assignments

News items in media houses can be categorized according to the degree of urgency. Those items which are regarded as important and demands immediate attention are referred as hard news while the opposite is true for soft news. Examples of hard news stories include issues pertaining to economics and politics and are generally deemed more appealing to journalists because they are associated with democratic functions of journalism. On the other hand, story items that can be categorized as soft news include sports, family and entertainment and have traditionally been deemed to be of less importance and more commercial in character. Those journalists who do not fit in either of the two categories are referred as general reporters and in most cases they are the majority.

Journalists who engaged in dealing with democratic related issues such as scrutinizing, disseminating political information and providing forums for debate intuitively appeared more suited to hard news.

Table 8. Support for the ideals of scrutiny, explanation and letting different opinions be heard in control for main area of coverage

	Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Total
Scrutiny						
Hard news	9.2%	5.3%	25.0%	28.9%	31.6%	100.0%
Soft news	4.9%	9.8%	24.4%	31.7%	29.3%	100.0%
General information	5.8%	10.9%	17.4%	35.5%	30.4%	100.0%
Explanation						
Hard news	2.6%	6.6%	18.4%	35.5%	36.8%	100%
Soft news	5.0%	5.0%	17.5%	38.8%	33.8%	100%
General information	4.3%	9.3%	15.7%	41.4%	29.3%	100%
Letting opinions be heard						
Hard news		2.6%	10.5%	32.9%	53.9%	100.0%
Soft news		2.4%	6.1%	39.0%	52.4%	100.0%
General information		1.4%	12.2%	36.7%	49.6%	100.0%

The results as indicated in Table 8 shows that the ideals of scrutiny and explanation were supported to a great extent by journalist in the general category while journalists in soft news areas showed the weakest support. The ideal of letting different opinions be heard was moderately supported by journalists.

CONCLUSION

The study findings showed that the ideals of scrutiny and explanation were consistently supported by journalists in different social groups and media houses thus indicating a show of homogeneity. They also demonstrated strong support for the ideal of letting different opinions be heard though to a less extent compared with scrutiny and explanation.

The three ideals form the basis of Kenyan journalists' professional identity. The three were rated the highest and there was homogeneity in all groups of journalists. This consolidation around a few central values that had long been acknowledged as legitimate in the field was a confirmation of adherence to the ideology that guards the profession. It is a sign of putting their foot down to protect their identity at a time when everything seems to be changing in the field of communication. The special role of journalists as pure collectors of information is no longer tenable at the moment since even ordinary citizen can do the same. The gathering around scrutiny and explanation seems only natural in this case because these ideals focus on what is considered —the true essence of journalism.

Scrutiny demands some level of independence on the part of scrutinizers and legitimate power to intervene in social processes. Ordinary people or interest organizations do not have this exclusive privilege to perform those duties. Explaining complicated events to the public presupposes social pathos and a general view from the pedagogues. These are pathos that journalists are expected to have obtained because of their experiences in the trade. This is what Prof. Olof Petersson referred as *journalismen*—The journalism (Petersson, 1994). The ability of journalists to see through the power holders is a crucial element to democracy. This therefore means that the key to exposure or to make decisions is in the hands of journalists and not the audience.

The journalistic function of offering transparent communication between social groups remain highly relevant today, even if internet offers a wide range of more direct communication opportunities, these can never completely replace the openness and credibility of traditional mass media channels. By leaving the information function behind and centralising on the functions of scrutiny, commentary and group communication, the journalistic corps shapes a professional identity that fits well into late modern society. The ability to access information is no longer exclusive. Economic interests, together with public authorities, strive to make information technology public property, and the educational level is generally improving in most countries. The information function is not what makes a journalist special anymore, because it is simultaneously performed by several actors. It is instead scrutiny, commentary and forum for debate that are emphasized in the minds of journalists, and it is no coincidence that precisely these

functions are stated in the constitution and media policy; they are truly anchored with those who perform the job, as well as externally.

On the ideological level, it will be inaccurate to conclude that the media industry in Kenya is going through a process of de- professionalization. The professional identity is flexible to a changing context because its main agenda is to stay in power. This therefore reveals the changeability and adaptiveness of the profession discourse at a time when traditional institutions are increasingly being questioned.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that journalists and media houses should specialise and concentrate in areas where they have comparative advantages. In order to be effective in democratic assignments they should concentrate more on investigative journalism and explaining complicated issues to audiences. Media training institutions should also keep appraising their curricula in order to develop and shape identities which are in diadem with the changing contexts in society

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