

Chapter 8

Role of Journalists in Development:

An Exploration of the Professional Autonomy of Kenyan Journalists

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ABSTRACT

The Kenyan media is marked by an unpredictable and changing political, social, cultural, economic, and technological environment that has heavily influenced the professionalism of journalists. The journalistic work is being threatened by the political influences, the emergence of online journalism, and citizen journalism, which the journalists have no control over. The big dilemma is the seemingly declining professionalism of journalism. Given these contextual trends coupled with the structural changes in journalism as a practice, this chapter explores the professional autonomy of Kenyan journalists based on a study carried out in Nairobi County.

INTRODUCTION

There are different perspectives on the definition of the terms “profession” and “professionalism.” Frederick Mosher (1982), as the dominant journalism scholar to break ground in identifying the characteristics and dimensions of professionalism in American society, defines a profession as “a reasonably clear-cut educational field, that ordinarily requires higher education at least through the bachelor’s level, and offers a lifetime career to its members” (Mosher, 1982, pp. 115-16). In addition, he

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classifies professions as “general professions”, which are fields employed by the public and the private sectors generally (such as law, medicine, engineering); and the “public service professions”, which are fields employed by the public sector generally (Mosher, 1982). Therefore, the term “professional” here is used to describe a class of educated individuals, possessing specialised skills, in a clearly defined field, regulated, and accredited in some way, by professional associations and/or educational agencies.

Professionals in any discipline are supposed to be as independent as possible in order to carry out their duties without undue influence from any stakeholders outside the trade. This aspect however may not completely apply to journalists especially those working in commercial media houses. The focus is always to serve the interests of the public but they must also provide room to cater for the wishes of the advertisers, the political, financial and business elites. Their testimony must always be above board in order to gain public trust and act as real representatives of the people.

Accuracy and impartiality are universally accepted as standard norms for any practicing journalist (Ibrahim, 2010). Kaplan (2002) contends that good journalism involves the abolishment and potential influence of own ideas and values when researching and publishing a story. Furthermore, objectivity boosts reliability (Fischer & Verrecchia, 2000). It is also Ward’s conviction that truth and objectivity are the main pillars of good journalism since the need to present two sides of the story remains apparently universal (Ward, 2005). Objective reporting involves the presentation of provable news free of personal evaluation or assumptions (Severin & Tankard, 2010). In the traditional sense, these definitions would mostly work. However, it is almost impossible to maintain this assumption especially when one looks at the presentation of African news online. Webbased journalism is a fastpaced environment, which means journalists are constantly under pressure to complete their new stories in order to remain competitive. The quest for objectivity is the main loser of this development.

Problem Statement

Journalism faces an erosion of identity resulting from various factors, including the use of technology to mediate services, and lack of faith in government institutions generally (Stuart, 2004). The new technological advance has given birth to online journalism which makes it hard to employ and control ethics, mode of training and corruption among media houses. Focusing upon journalism, the erosion of status may be seen through the dimensions of informational asymmetry (different media houses report the same event differently) and perception of professional value (quality, factual, ethical and sensible reporting, observing ethics (Bowman, 2000).

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