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**Title: Immediacy and openness in a digital Africa: Networked-convergent journalism in Kenya**

**Article & version: Post-print**

**Original citation: Mudhai, O. F. (2011) Immediacy and openness in a digital Africa: Networked-convergent journalism in Kenya, in Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism 12 (6): 674-91.**

**Publisher: Sage**

**Website: <http://jou.sagepub.com/content/12/6.toc>**

**DOI: 10.1177/1464884911405470**

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**Available in the CURVE Research Collection: October 2012**

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# Immediacy and openness in a digital Africa: Networked-convergent journalisms in Kenya\*

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## ABSTRACT

Before the US crackdown on WikiLeaks website from 2010, the narrative of freedom dominating discourses on uneasy deployment of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in journalism was more prevalent in Africa – and developing regions – than in advanced democracies. Little wonder WikiLeaks did not, at least initially, include African media partners in their potent 2010 ‘cablegate’ exposés. From the 1996 Zambian government ban of the *Post* online to the recent onslaughts on bloggers in parts of the continent, ICT uses in journalism have reflected national contexts, with restrictions often resulting in self-censorship, as well as innovations that borrow from and build on global developments. This ‘glocal’ context perspective defines the review here of the new media use in journalism in Africa with an examination of Kenyan media coverage – mainly between 2005 and 2010 constitutional referenda. The focus is on coverage by two leading newspapers in their strive to keep up with emerging alternative spaces of networked online expression. The aim here is to determine the extent to which the coverage reflects immediacy and openness in a networked and converged environment, with implications for democracy. The article employs comparative approach and qualitative content-genre analysis.

**Keywords:** Alternative journalism, convergence, genre analysis, Kenya, mobile journalism (mojo), networked journalism, online journalism

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\* A version of this article is published Aug 2011 in *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 12(6): 674-691 (<http://jou.sagepub.com/content/12/6.toc>).



## INTRODUCTION

Many African countries have made progress with regard to civil liberties and freedom of expression following post-colonial adjustments, but the sensitive data held by WikiLeaks would have been at higher risk if hosted on the continent's servers – although US government reaction to the website's 2010 'cablegate' exposés show that the danger would be as great anywhere else. At a time Kenya watchers thought the country was well past the era of extreme media repression especially following the early 1990s re-adoption of a pluralist political system, masked gunmen raided the headquarters of the country's oldest media house and confiscated computers believed to contain information offensive to powerful politicians. They beat up the Standard Group (SG) Limited's staff on night duty, took off-air the company's Kenya Television Network and set on fire several copies of the following day's *East African Standard* newspaper. The raiders were later confirmed to be acting on the instructions of then Internal Security minister John Michuki whose uncouth warning later was that "if you rattle a snake, be prepared to be bitten" (Ogola, 2010: 123).

It is therefore no surprise that whistle-blower website WikiLeaks founder and editor-in-chief Julian Assange could have been reluctant to engage media partners in Africa (and other developing regions) – at least by the time of writing this article – in their scheme that roped in the *Guardian* (UK), the *New York Times* (USA), *Der Spiegel* (Germany), *Le Monde* (France), *El Pais* (Spain) and *Novaya Gazeta* (Russia). Ironically, WikiLeaks' first exposé is widely known to relate to revelations of high-level corruption in a Kenyan regime ahead of the controversial 2007 election. At a public forum in mid 2010, Assange argued the exposé - based on a report compiled by London-based consultancy firm Kroll Associates UK Ltd that was commissioned by a new Kenyan government – was 'the holy grail of Kenyan journalism'<sup>i</sup> as local media were initially reluctant to publish the content even after dissemination in regional and global outlets. This article examines the local and global (glocal) context of journalistic practice in Africa, taking a comparative approach, with a focus on Kenya – based on qualitative content-genre analysis.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

In examining the changing nature of journalistic practices in Africa with a focus on Kenya, this article links what is happening on the continent with the larger conceptual and contextual developments. It is in this sense that a comparative approach is adopted. The article also uses qualitative content analysis and genre analysis to examine news and information output. This is based on the assumption that ‘news registers, on the one hand, the organizational constraints under which journalists labour [and] on the other hand, the literary forms and narrative devices journalists regularly use’ (Carey cited in Fenton, 2010: 11). A group of researchers used as one of their methods ‘qualitative analysis of news content’ to track ‘a range of story types across online mainstream news media, online alternative media, social networking sites and YouTube’ (Fenton, 2010: 12). This approach is especially used here to examine digital-era coverage of recent developments in Kenya – in particular between 2005 and 2010 constitutional referenda, during which the disputed December 2007 general election was held resulting in unprecedented violence. The happenings selected were sampled purposively due to their political significance locally and globally.

Focus on text has its weaknesses but as indicated above if done qualitatively rather than quantitatively it does give some insight into journalistic trends and culture: ‘research on online journalism could benefit from a greater recognition of and reflection on *the text as a unit*. ... Genre theory and discourse analysis could for instance be valuable tools’ (Steensen, 2010: 12, emphasis in original). Lüders, et al (2010: 949) point out the need to take into account the ‘textual practice’, of both production and reception – considering ‘both changing social expectations and textual conventions.’ For Lüders et al (2010: 949), four elements of this approach are text, genre, media and platform while for Bhatia (2008: 164) the four levels are text, genre, professional practices and professional culture.

## **NETWORKED-CONVERGENT JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY**

The WikiLeaks mode of operation shows how networking in a converged digital media environment has become crucial to journalistic practice around the world – with influence in Africa. Becket (2010: 1) announces that it is ‘clear that networked journalism has arrived’ in the form of ‘a remarkable combination of online and mainstream, professional and citizen media ... news media that has audience interactivity, participation and connectivity’. Pointing out that the Internet not only adds to news coverage especially during dramatic moments such as elections, but also changes the reporting Becket (2010: 1) goes on to define this concept.

By ‘Networked Journalism’ I mean a synthesis of traditional news journalism and the emerging forms of participatory media enabled by Web 2.0 technologies such as mobile phones, email, websites, blogs, micro-blogging, and social networks. Networked Journalism allows the public to be involved in every aspect of journalism production through crowd-sourcing, interactivity, hyper-linking, user-generated content and forums. It changes the creation of news from being linear and top-down to a collaborative process.

This kind of journalism adds value through editorial diversity, connectivity- interactivity and relevance besides offering ‘free’ content, curation of premium and journalism as a public service (Becket, 2010: 17), and in the process helps in ‘saving journalism so it can save the world’ (Becket, 2008: subtitle). In the UK context, Becket (2010) highlights examples that include ‘live blogging’, breaking news-gathering, local journalism and independent Internet journalism. This kind of journalism is catching on in Kenya and other parts of Africa – driven more by alternative practitioners such as bloggers than by conventional media houses. After noting that ‘all media are local media, so we need to pay attention to the special circumstances of African journalism’, Beckett (2008: 116) identifies the nature of the state (fragile, liberation, complex and poor) and diffusion of technology – especially mobile phone explosion in spite of obvious digital divide issues – as characterizing ‘African Networked Journalism’ (p.120) that is ‘shifting power around’ and ‘reflecting a deep urge among citizens for a more direct and open form of political communication’ (p.126).

Becket's conceptualization is not new, especially given its borrowing from other scholars such as Castells (2000) whose idea of the network society values technology-enabled networks more than hierarchies, as it is shared by others such as Fenton (2010) and it builds on the convergence concept which has mainly been used in reference to professional journalism. Although there are multiple conceptualizations of convergence, Larry Pryor advocates a working definition of convergence in journalism as 'what takes place in the newsroom as editorial staff members work together to produce multiple products for multiple platforms to reach a mass audience with interactive content, often on a 24/7 timescale' (Quinn and Filak, 2005: 4). Simply put, "convergence is about doing journalism and telling stories using the most appropriate media" (Quinn and Filak, 2005: 7). It is 'a revolutionary and evolutionary form of journalism that is emerging in many parts of the world... varies from country to country and from culture to culture both within countries and individual companies' (Quinn and Filak, 2005: 3). This variation is apparent even in Africa, where there are differences within countries and between countries due to various forms of obstacles.

Obstacles include 'cultural factors', such as 'intergroup bias dynamic' of journalists valuing their medium-career more than others (Quinn and Filak, 2005: 15). For instance, for a long time staff at the newspaper division of the Standard Group (SG) Ltd and its Kenya Television Network (KTN) operated from different buildings in Nairobi. Although this was partly to do with previous ownership history, staff from both companies hardly shared newsrooms, offices and resources even in recent years when they have shared a building. 'Angels will not work with people they perceive as devils ... print journalists who look down on television people, labeling them as dimwit poor spellers, are less likely to welcome broadcast people into their newsrooms' (Quinn and Filak, 2005: 15). All the same, SG management has in some cases deployed journalists across the two outfits – mainly from the newspaper to KTN.

Although in the UK the Guardian and the BBC have enhanced their newsroom convergence to avoid a medium-based approach, the SG scenario is not unique even in the developed world. In the USA, Juan Antonio Giner argues 'that most

forms of newspaper and television convergence were more like multiple independent operations than pure collaboration ... different family circuses with different cultures shared the same tent but in each ring they still were acting as a single circus' (Quinn and Filak, 2005: 7). Although the situation is beginning to change in some of Africa's bigger media houses, including the leading one in East Africa, the Nation Media Group (NMG), separate teams still tend to go out to cover an event for different media for the same company. However, this is still a matter for the editors to consider on a case-by-case basis.

Rich Gordon has identified at least five forms of convergence common in the USA (Quinn and Filak, 2005: 4-6): ownership convergence (cross-promotion and content sharing in the same company); tactical convergence (content-sharing and partnership between companies); structural convergence (changes in newsgathering and distribution, such as creating teams to repackage content); information-gathering convergence (multi-skill reporting); storytelling or presentation convergence (needing appropriate equipment for the working journalist). In Kenya, both SG and NMG adopted structural convergence by creating special web teams – mostly repurposing print material for the web. NMG even created a senior post of managing editor in charge of media convergence. Nairobi's Capital FM also launched its Digital Media Division to distribute content via their website and mobile phone. In Kenya, there have been some concerns – especially by the trade union – about information gathering and story-telling convergence (that it results in exploitation and poorer quality news content and packaging) but this has somewhat been reduced by the changing environment where citizen journalists happily operate in such a manner for no pay. As Gordon notes, such concerns include not just remuneration but also quality of work of the multimedia reporting, also known as *platypus* or *Inspector Gadget* or *backpack* journalism, which are not unique to Kenya or Africa. 'In some parts of the world, this presents the most controversial form of convergence as people debate whether one person can successfully produce quality content in all forms of media' (Quinn and Filak, 2005: 6, citing Gordon).

Convergence has become necessary due to increasing ease of access to different forms of technology, as a result of social and legal structural factors and due to



audience considerations. In Kenya, the media have concentrated more on computer-based convergence but they are increasingly aware that the mobile phone has become an important platform. Despite perceptions that in Africa, time is not as important as it is in the developed world (BBC, 2003), a new generation of content consumers-producers want to be able to access information on the move and at their convenience quickly. 'Some people in advanced societies tend to be time poor but asset rich. ... These people demand convenience, and they are usually willing to pay for it...' (Quinn and Filak, 2005:9). Unlike in some parts of the USA where the battle is more for such people's 'disposable time' rather than their 'disposable income' (Quinn and Filak, 2005:9), most media houses in Africa would want to see evidence of income first before investing resources in the battle for time. Unfortunately for the media houses, most of the income from the mobile phone channel is often largely grabbed by the network provider rather than the content producer. This is what City University of New York student entrepreneur Adeola Oladele discovered when she won a share of a US\$43,000 seed money<sup>ii</sup> to disseminate news via cell phone in Nigeria. 'After contacting mobile phone companies, I'm finding out that it would be more expensive for me to broadcast through phone companies' (Oladele, 2009).

All the same, the democratic significance of networked and convergent journalism is the potential of 'reshaping the relationship between media producers and consumers' (Jenkins, cited in Liu et al, 2009: 44) in a participatory culture. Two characteristics, immediacy and openness are particularly of significance. While it is not correct for Anderson (2009: 5) to argue that '... electronic journalism is still in its infancy' as the term is wider but given the author's reference to the Internet there is validity in the argument that this medium 'does provide entirely new ways of accessing recent and breaking news 24 hours a day' and this can result in 'news provision ... [being] ... truly democratized'. The new digital environment has 'accelerated greatly the speed at which news can be transmitted and affected significantly the range of issues that can be covered' (Anderson, 2009: 5-6). While this immediacy enabled Kenyans to instantly watch developments at crucial moments such as the 2007 general

election, it unsettled the government so much that it ordered a ban on live broadcasts. It has to be accepted that with immediacy comes some bias and errors – but the same could also be challenged or corrected. ‘It is a world where a certain new bias has developed, one which turns around technology ... that technology has radically changed the way in which news is reported...’ (McGregor, 1997: 2). The ban on mainstream media (especially local TV) coverage did not prevent some live reporting in particular by alternative reporters – for instance via mobile phone and blogs. In an open media environment it is more difficult to control immediacy as the Kenyan government realized. ‘Networked journalism proposes to take advantage of the new opportunities for collaboration ... Professional and amateur, journalist and citizen may now work together to gather and share more news in more ways to more people than was ever possible before’ (Jeff Jarvis in Beckett, 2008: vii). Some of the alternative journalists are activist journalists. For activist digital journalism, ‘the promise lies in the ability of activist news outfits and the social movements they support to create an alternative information sphere that provide news, reports, and mobilizing information’ (Wall, 2003: 121). For this crop of journalists, objectivity is a myth – as the Kenyan case showed. ‘In this new digital activist sphere, objectivity in the news is seen as impossible to achieve; instead reporters are often movement members who share movement values ... this sphere anticipates an active audience that will not only make sense of complicated events, but act ...’ (Wall, 2003: 121-122). And act, they did in Kenya during the 2007-2008 post-election violence. Some of the networks came up with practical solutions such as Ushahidi (witness) crowd sourcing website, in the sub-category of crisis reporting. ‘Various information technologies play an increasingly important role in the dissemination of news and information during a crisis. These technologies are increasingly digital, wireless, and mobile and provide Internet connectivity’ (Pavlik, 2003: 75). Openness that result in ordinary people reporting and engaging with the news raise ‘the potential for misinformation’ (Pavlik, 2003: 76) but although the technologies raise troubling questions and concerns, they ‘can help provide vital information to citizens to help them make better-informed decisions’ (Pavlik, 2003: 88). In their study of Flickr use during what they call crises as *crisis informatics*, Liu et al (2009: 43)

note that 'sharing photos in such situations can be informative, newsworthy and even therapeutic'.

The media environment in most of Africa is increasingly becoming open, more so than it was as recently as only a decade ago and more dramatically than has happened in the developed democracies. A more closed environment restricts the *range* of issues and sources for news. 'The fewer the people producing it and the more limited the number of first-hand sources ... the more limited will be the range of issues...' (Anderson and Weymouth, 2009: 34). Tightening control of information flow is becoming increasingly difficult for governments compared to when Hilliard (in Robins and Hilliard, 2002: 15-16) wrote that 'with few exceptions, all governments in Africa retain tight control of content, mostly through direct censorship'. News is no longer largely under the control of senior news executives who now recognize 'the digital universe opening up before them' (Allan, 2006: 169) as 'digital devices from notebook computers, digital cameras, mobile telephones and the like are as powerful as they are transportable, opening up new possibilities in first-person reporting, fact-checking and "watch-dogging" ...' (Allan, 2006: 171). With a more open communication space, African journalists (some of whom are correspondents for foreign outlets, especially following elimination or reduced resourcing of foreign bureaux) and other new media users are better placed to counter dominant image of hopelessness and desperation projected by global media companies. It is in this regard that former editor of *The Namibian* newspaper, Jean Sutherland argued that 'at a time in Africa when the widespread view is predominantly one of disease, suffering, war, famine, and poverty', Africans 'now have the opportunity to provide a more complete picture of the people and events in our countries' (Hilliard in Robins and Hilliard, 2002: 20). The annual Highway Africa new media conference and publications by the events initiator Guy Berger (2005 and 2007) highlight the great interest in the use of new media in gathering, packaging and disseminating news and information.

It is important to point out that all is not rosy in the differentiated local contexts in Africa, which should be borne in mind. Some parts of the continent still have unfavourable legal and political environment for digital media even though

Ogundimu (2002:221) argues that ‘...unlike the older forms of mass communication, African governments have generally stayed away from attempts to control the Internet by restricting public access to the gateway.’ An ordinary ‘down to earth’ Egyptian Law student Abdelkarim Nabil Suleiman, aka Kareem Amer, was expelled from university and jailed by the state for four years as well as beaten and detained on account of his critical blog entries (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2010a; Suleiman, 2004). He is one of hundreds of the country’s resilient blogosphere members repeatedly harassed by Egyptian authorities whose actions have earned the country a place in the list of ‘Internet enemies’ (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2010c). For posting online at an Alexandria Internet café a video of police officers sharing proceeds of a drug deal, citizen journalist-activist Mohammed Khaled Said was killed by two policemen outside the open access facility (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2010b). Other examples include Sudan’s temporary blockage of UN-sponsored Miraya FM radio in November 2010, Rwanda’s ban of the independent newspaper *Umuwugizi* online in June 2010, Algeria’s blockage of the website of independent Radio Kalima-Algérie ([www.kalimadz.com](http://www.kalimadz.com)) for a few days in March 2010, Mauritania’s jailing of *Taqadoumy* website editor Hanevy Ould Dehah in 2009.<sup>iii</sup> All the same, the situation in Africa is not as bad as it is in some countries in the Middle East and Asia. No sub-Saharan African country is in the radar of Reporters without Borders top list of Internet enemies, and only two from North Africa – Egypt and Tunisia – are (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2010c). However, the situation could easily change especially with China’s closeness to a number of African regimes.

There is also the problem of access to the digital networks by journalists and audiences. ‘I have been struck repeatedly by the miracle of reporters working with erratic (or no) computer connections and electricity...’ (Ansell, n.d.: 6). All the same, barriers to do with infrastructure and high access cost are not new, and not unique to Africa. While there is hope in the competition and regulation that are bringing prices down as well as the recent launch of fibre optic cables projects in the east coast, this will remain a problem – though no worse than barriers to accessing conventional media.

A more complex problem is access to high level research and interactivity that is truly democratic – a problem that is also not unique to Africa but could be worse there. ‘There are serious doubts as to just how many people within the advanced democracies are likely to use the Internet in a such a sophisticated way or even use it for following hard news at all’ (Anderson and Weymouth, 2009: 33).

Recent surveys indicate hardly a third of respondents in the US and the UK use the Internet to access news about politics, and the number has hardly grown since 2000 - with hardly any significant growth around election (Anderson and Weymouth, 2009: 33). A 2008 Harvard Berkman Center for Internet and Society report points out the limitations of ‘participatory and online’ newsgathering and dissemination even though they ‘supplement and expand’ coverage (Miel and Faris, cited in Goggin 2011: 107). Goggin (2011: 107) points out that ‘while this critique may be accurate as a general summation of mobiles in news to date, I think it overstates the case – and also underestimates the scope and depth of the shift underway.’ The mobile phone in particular remains a key platform for news and information production and access, especially in Africa.

One aspect of access is sourcing or gate-keeping. Wider sourcing and greater interactivity are key to diversification of voices and representation in news, so it is in this context that in the next section we examine Kenya’s mainstream and alternative media coverage of selected events and happenings – well known and obscure. African journalists, having been among early adopters of the Internet and mobile phones, are increasingly “doing it digitally” and are “breaking the dependence on gatekeepers and secretaries to get access to key sources.” (Berger 2005: 9,12). However, Forbes et al (2005: 35) argue that, “in reality, the use of the internet for electronic investigative journalism in Africa still has a long way to go.” Developments in this area may be hampered by the fact that in the wake of intensified terrorist threats, legislation in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe, among other African countries, imply sourcing information from the internet is either monitored or requires obligation to report suspicions of threats (Forbes et al 2005: 89). It is for this reason that a WikiLeaks approach would meet great difficulty, but would be very welcome in helping foster a more open society.

All the same, African journalists have not shied away from exploiting digital technology in sourcing news and information – including sensitive ones. South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* team of Sam Sole, Stefaans Brümmer and Adriaan Basson were commended by judges for winning a R200,000 Kuiper Award for Investigative Journalism for, among others, 'using the internet to track down individuals in obscure places' (M&G, 2009). Namibian investigative journalist John Grobler 'makes use of websites like Global Witness, and an extensive network of colleagues, sources, and fellow travellers. Of course, he also uses the Internet, but cautions:

Public sources, including the Internet, only take you halfway there. But it makes it enormously easy to contact someone in Dubai or Antwerp whereas previously it would have been very expensive to do so. The newspapers here are small, no huge budgets, but the Internet has certainly leveled the playing fields in this regard... (T. Kenichi Serino, contribution<sup>iv</sup> in Ansell, n.d.: 2).

Obijiofor (2009) analyzes how four Nigerian newspapers – *Daily Sun*, *Punch*, *the Guardian* and *This Day* in early 2008 – relied on email and web-based information sources to cover especially the rebel side of the country's Niger Delta conflict.

## **EMERGING NEWS GENRES-PLATFORMS: AFRICA AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS**

Various forms of journalistic practices are emerging in the networked and converged digital environment that expand the range of producers and sources, and enable greater interaction than before. One is mobile journalism (Mojo) or mobile news (Goggin, 2011). Like the convergence concept, one definition puts more emphasis on conventional rather than alternative journalism.

'Mobile journalism ... is a concept aimed at professional journalists, their identity, changing practices, conditions and processes of work ... 'Mojo' is the use of mobile phones by journalists for reporting ...

an intervention in the profession of journalism' (Goggin, 2011: 107).

Those who view 'mojo' as a revolutionary concept in news include journalists such as Norwegian Frank Barth-Nilsen (mojoevolution.com) and Australian Stephen Quinn (globalmojo.org) as well as share video broadcasting sites such as Qik (qik.com), Bambuser (bambuser.blogspot.com) and Mogulus (Goggin, 2011: 108). Leading newspapers around the world, including in Africa now offer a mobile phone channel or service. '...mobile news is a very important and potent facet of contemporary news and journalism, as it is, in particular situations, of the larger forces of culture and politics' (Goggin, 2011: 100). Certain African governments (Nigeria and Kenya) have attempted or threatened to shut down mobile phone networks. Of particular significance to the developing world is the use of the short messaging service or SMS (Goggin 2011: 104-5) as the application has less technical demands on the higher number of low-cost handsets. With text messaging and alerts building on from the pager while with the Internet 'mobiles offer a conjunct but distinct form of online news' using 'convergent media applications...', there is the culturally significant role of the mobile' for professional journalists as well as members of the public (Goggin 2011: 100-101). The SMS in particular has been used innovatively by Sri-Lanka based JasmineNews (Goggin, 2011: 104-5). In Kenya, SMS was partly used for rumours that caused some panic during the 2008 post-election violence.

Another feature that makes the mobile phone significant for reporting and consuming news and information is the camera. The camera-enabled mobile phone in particular allows any user to capture images that would otherwise be 'out of the range of the professional photographer's lens' (Beckett, cited in Goggin, 2011: 106). Posting such images online or sending them to news outlets locally and abroad democratizes the gathering and dispersal of news with minimal or no journalistic or official gate-keeping and censorship. 'Digital cameras, including cell or mobile telephones equipped with cameras, make opportunistic eyewitness photography easier than it has ever been' (Liu et al 2009: 43). In the mid 2009 Iranian Green Revolution, 'much of the footage that was featured, capturing the latest events, was shot on mobile phone cameras, by

individual protesters and witnesses, and also journalists' (Goggin 2011: 99). One key highlight is the coverage, on Youtube, of the shooting and death of Iranian student protester Neda Agha-Soltan (Goggin, 2011: 99).

Activist journalists have found mobile phones particularly useful. The use of mobiles for human rights activism has been highlighted in Burma (Goggin, 2011: 105) and a number of African countries (Mudhai, 2006). One specific example is 'the *Voices of Africa* project, launched in May 2007, with the support of the Voices of Africa Media Foundation based in Haarlem, in the Netherlands' with a strong feature being 'the use of mobiles for newsgathering' (Goggin 2011: 106). The project's 'contribution to media and democracy' (Goggin 2011: 106) is evident in the open nature of contributions of articles and still-moving images 'without a computer and without having traditional Internet connection' (Nyirubugara, cited in Goggin 2011: 106).

Not particularly subversive and routine is the use of mobile phones by conventional journalists. Following interviews with several Kenyan news journalists and other media actors in January-February 2010, Karlsen (2010: 1) had the following to report:

The findings suggest that Kenyan news journalists use mobile technology in several ways in their work: they set up interview appointments by calling their sources; they conduct telephone interviews; they record interviews using the mobile phone's microphone which is particularly useful in conflict-sensitive reporting; they send Internet links to their sources whom can read the online news from their mobile phone's browser.

As a result, the author argues, the mobile phone has given journalists greater access to sources and the public have better access to the media, especially radio call-in shows, and this 'can help to promote democracy in the country' (Karlsen 2010: 1). The concept of 'Mojo', for instance in the 2008 Nokia Research Centre and Reuters partnership with University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, is perceived to be more sophisticated than such routine usage.



Another form of practice is the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS), especially Facebook and Twitter – which have also become common features of mainstream media websites. Although ‘the company Twitter does not see itself as a news channel, but as something far more dispersed and organic’, their ‘neurological metaphors remain compelling, evoking McLuhan’s claim that “electric technologies” act as extensions of the human nervous system’ (Crawford, 2011: 115). Increasingly, many more ordinary people are using Twitter ‘to create, distribute and consume news’ (Crawford, 2011: 117) and media organizations are using it for ‘sending breaking news updates, teasers for feature stories and commentary on the events of the day’ (Crawford, 2011: 116). It is worth noting that major news broadcasters such as CNN ‘treat Twitter like another broadcast outlet ... another pipe to push down news feeds’ (Crawford, 2011: 118) – not responding to feedback and virtually not following users or others. The situation is not any different in relation to African media outlets. However, Twitter has become very useful for alternative news coverage. Twitter was so crucial to the public coverage of the mid 2009 Iranian post-election protests and brutality that an official of the US State Department sent out a plea for delay in a scheduled outage and maintenance (Goggin, 2011: 99-100). The coverage turned tables on the rolling news reputation of mainstream media such as the CNN (cnnfail.com). ‘CNN appeared slow and thoroughly disconnected from the news ecology on Twitter...’ (Crawford, 2011: 122). In certain cases, such as the bombing of Jakarta in mid 2009 and the ditching of US Airways Flight 1549 into the Hudson River, news-breaking can be truly via Twitter but ‘describing these moments as journalism is retrofitting an established mode of practice onto something that is materially different’ (Crawford, 2011: 120). In Africa, a well-known great Twitter-Facebook or social media moment came in coverage of the Tunisian unrest that peaked in January 2011 with the exit of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Howard 2011, Ingram 2011, Martin 2011, Zuckerman 2011).

A more common form in Africa is blogging by ordinary people as well as blogging by journalists, dubbed ‘j-blogging’ (Robinson 2006). Most blogs are personal, have limited audiences and surveys by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in the US indicated in 2006 that ‘among blogs only 5 per cent of postings

matched the criteria' of serious news reporting (Anderson and Weymouth, 2009: 34). Although blogs were hyped in the UK around elections, they hardly played any significant role – with hardly any difference between 2001 and 2005 elections (Deacon et al, cited in Anderson and Weymouth, 2009: 34). Blogs have all the same been a significant platform for coverage or dissemination of alternative news and views that would otherwise hardly appear in the mainstream media – especially in Africa where self-censorship is prevalent among conventional journalists. 'It was on the Internet that one of the biggest scandals of the decade was exposed: following blogger Wael Abbas' posting of torture videos filmed in police stations, the implicated police officials were arrested and indicted' (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2010c). Good blogs tend to be focused and are based on a culture of dissent (Allan, 2006: 172-3). For detained Egyptian blogger Suleiman and his partners, the focus is on human rights. 'Our main goal is to defend the rights of Muslim and Arabic women against all form of discrimination and to stop violent crimes' (Suleiman, 2004: home page). Like in other parts of the world, certain bloggers such as those publicly persecuted in North Africa and parts of west Africa as well as some well known ones in less restrictive environments such as Kenya and South Africa are so well known that others seek audiences through links with them. 'An emergent hierarchy is forming between a small number of celebrity bloggers and the vast majority' (Allan, 2006: 173). In the case of Kenya, Zuckerman (2009) singles out a network of well-known Kenyan bloggers, such as Ory Okolloh ([www.kenyanpundit.com](http://www.kenyanpundit.com)) and White African ([www.whiteafrican.com](http://www.whiteafrican.com)), and details their discourses around the 2007-2008 electoral crisis.

Another common, and even older, form of journalistic platform is the conventional website. As early as 1997 alone, at least 50 newspapers were online in Africa (Robins and Hilliard, 2002: viii). The issue for mainstream outlets in Africa is no longer whether to go online but how to improve the features to include the latest aspects of networked and convergent journalism. There are also a number of unconventional news and information websites. They include surveillance ones such as Ushahidi, Swahili for Witness ([www.ushahidi.com](http://www.ushahidi.com)) and Sudan Vote Monitor ([www.sudanvotemonitor.com](http://www.sudanvotemonitor.com)),

content aggregators such as Kenya Moja or One Kenya ([www.kenyamoja.com](http://www.kenyamoja.com)), message board Kenyan List ([www.kenyanlist.com](http://www.kenyanlist.com)), those with local focus such as Abeingo News ([www.abeingo.org](http://www.abeingo.org)) and Diaspora ones such as Semaniseme: Voice of Kenyans ([www.semaniseme.com](http://www.semaniseme.com)). Nigeria's Jonathan Elendu has a unique website that focuses on investigative reporting ([www.elendureports.com](http://www.elendureports.com)) 'Elendu Reports demonstrates the potential of diligent no-holds-barred investigative reporting for the continent of Africa enabled by the tools of web 1.0 and 2.0. Recent reports of corrupt government officials with the accompanying images of their ill-gotten luxury properties in Western cities is threshold-breaking, the denials and obfuscations of the past by the officials is now indefensible, the brigandage seemingly more brazen' (Okafor 2005).

## **NEW MEDIA AND COVERAGE OF SELECTED MILESTONES AND HAPPENINGS IN KENYA**

One thing that was discernible in the Kenyan media coverage of the 2005 referendum on a draft constitution, following 15 years of agitation and negotiation, was the ease with which it was possible for mainstream and alternative journalists to interview former Chairman of the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission, Prof Yash Pal Ghai who resigned a year before the vote which he was opposed to in principle. At that time, the use of new media was not very prevalent so media monitoring in that period mainly focused on mainstream print and broadcast outlets – with the private media reporting mainly viewed as balanced and state media considered 'grossly' biased (Andreassen and Tostensen, 2006).

Limited examination of some of the recent reporting by Kenyan media does not reveal revolutionary transformation of access. Instead, one gets the impression they are still at the mercy of sources – but the positive development is that of openness, in that they more clearly express their frustration to the news consumer. One of the stories that has been in the Kenyan media from 2006 is that of abuse of power through Armenians Artur brothers, Margaryan and Sargasyan – believed to have been involved in the raid at the SG Ltd newsroom,

and were later expelled from the country following a fracas at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. From abroad, they have been feeding Kenyan mainstream journalists rather than the journalists seeking, investigating and obtaining stories by themselves. In a recent report<sup>v</sup> the duo availed to journalists documents claiming the government had in 2008 authorized them to return to the country as investors. The journalists noticed a discrepancy in the names, and made that clear to the reader – as well as the mode of access to the source. ‘In email interviews with the *Sunday Nation*, one of the brothers said he did not have any issue with the misspelt names.’ The paper also informed the reader that they could not get hold of the government official best placed to comment on the matter. ‘Immigration minister Otieno Kajwang’ could not be reached for comment on the document as his phone was switched off’. This shows the mere existence of the technology does not necessarily deliver the source and the story.

Apart from abuse of power, a common type of story that Kenyan journalists often work on relates to corruption – and sources are often unwilling to cooperate. One such story touched on awards of tenders to relatives of Water and Irrigation Minister Charity Ngilu in her ministry.<sup>vi</sup> As a mark of transparency and accountability, and to give the impression that the minister is avoiding the media, the journalist went into details about attempts to get the story via mobile phone.

‘Mrs Ngilu did not respond to repeated calls from the *Sunday Nation* on Saturday. But people close to the minister called the newsroom trying to find out contents of the story after the *Sunday Nation* sent short text messages to Mrs Ngilu. The SMS message to Mrs Ngilu read: “We are doing a story on procurement issues in your ministry. Specifically, we wish to know if you were aware that some of the firms that won tenders were owned by your relatives. Kindly let us know as we plan to run the story tomorrow (today).” The one to the assistant minister read: “We are doing a story a story on procurement issues in the Water ministry. Specifically, we wish to know if you are aware that your relative Apaa Dennis is a director of one of the firms that won controversial tenders. Kindly let us

know as we plan to run the story tomorrow.” But the two had not responded to our enquiries by the time we went to press.’

Although some stories in the mainstream press still appear without bylines, there is a trend especially in the two leading dailies (published by NMG and SG) to have the reporter’s byline accompanied by the author’s email address. For news reports, this tends to appear at the top of story but in commentaries the email address tends to be at the bottom. Those whose authors are anonymized, especially stories that appear sensitive, often appear with the general News Desk email address. Provision of contacts shows the newspapers expect the readers to engage with the journalists, as well as with the content and each other through the usual provision for comments by those who register.

These developments are partly driven by the thriving alternative reporting that are more open, and from which at times Kenyan mainstream journalists plagiarize (Zuckerman, 2010: 189). The mainstream media content also get relayed by alternative media practitioners, some less well known such as the Kenya section of Instablogs ([www.instablogs.com/kenya](http://www.instablogs.com/kenya)). This is ‘a news ecosystem bringing bloggers, citizen journalists and traditional media together ... a place to discover, share, contribute and share with the world and people who are changing it’ ([www.instablogs.com/tour](http://www.instablogs.com/tour)). Rather than break news, most entries either express opinion or review stories that have appeared in the local media. Others give one-paragraph summaries of stories appearing on the websites of Kenyan media and provide a link for users to read more. Although Kenya’s popular postings are traceable to December 2006, only three stories are archived from then until January 2008 when post-election violence had intensified. One of the most active registrants, Rose Ng’ang’a (<http://wangui.instablogs.com>), had posted 180 articles, provided 455 comments and offered 136 links from June 2008 to mid October 2010. Members can also track each other. It is this kind of networking that is impacting on news culture and practices in the mainstream press.

One genre that is thriving in the alternative realms is that of citizen video journalists. They film, package and disseminate online interesting and dramatic footage – mainly of wrongdoing – captured in opportunistic circumstances. One example is Youtube video of an overloaded pick-up truck with Kenyan registration taken as it swerves precariously and flips with passengers in back.<sup>vii</sup> Another one posted in January 2011 is that of traffic policeman in a brawl with a lorry driver watched by members of the public.<sup>viii</sup> In the second video, someone is suggesting in Swahili to the cameraman to make sure they film all the policemen, including their force numbers, after they caught up the lorry driver having been apparently beaten up and handcuffed.

One other aspect worth discussing here is how immediacy has been crucial especially during a major event such as during a vote. The live coverage of the Kenyan 2007 election, and the brief ban on such coverage has been widely known. While mainstream broadcast media streamed content live online (though mainly via paid-for websites<sup>ix</sup>) and websites used the 'Breaking News' genre on their websites, the government ban on live coverage resulted in some Kenyan bloggers 'redoubling their efforts as citizen reporters' (Zuckerman, 2010: 190). A number of these bloggers changed from monitoring and commenting on what was being reported by the mainstream media to actually reporting what was going on the ground, with account and images 'that were hard to find in international media coverage of the confrontations' (Zuckerman, 2010: 191, citing blogger Daudi Were). It is through these efforts that the network of Kenyan bloggers linked up with technology specialists to develop the 'free and open source software for information collection, visualization and interactive mapping' that is Ushahidi ([www.ushahidi.com](http://www.ushahidi.com)). Through this 'form of citizen collaborative citizen journalism' (Zuckerman, 2010: 192) came crisis reporting and crowd sourcing genres. 'Basically, you have an incident – that hopefully someone gets a picture or video of. A report on what happened and who was involved, and a location. That information is submitted and then populated into a map-based view that is easy to search by location and/or category' (Hersman, 2008). Immediacy was a vital aspect of this platform. 'All events submitted are reported real time to the engine so that they will display immediately' (Andrew

in Hersman, 2008). Such form of alternative reporting provided quite some challenge for the mainstream media.

The aftermath of the 2007 election debacle also showed that Kenyan citizen journalists make an effort to engage with ethical issues in sometimes frank and open discourse. 'Some bloggers and online forums try to moderate their content, but others appear to have shunned moderation ... Some bloggers called for responsible writing...' (Njeri, 2008). In the end, new media immediacy and openness was a double-edged sword as 'hate' texts easily found their way online, via SMS and on air.

In the 2010 Kenyan constitutional referendum the two leading Kenyan dailies once again displayed a case of mainstream journalism playing catch-up with the alternative – and with journalistic trends around the world. During crises and major events, Kenyan bloggers log their observations and thoughts live – so rather than simply post breaking news every now and then the *Daily Nation* and the *East African Standard* incorporated live text coverage of the referendum. On 4 August 2010 – the day of the referendum, the *Daily Nation* started its live text on its website at 06.50 East African Standard Time – also drawing attention to their Facebook and Twitter presence as well. Apart from giving background information and providing relevant links, coverage gave updates on observation by their reporters in the field and quoted some of the ordinary users who gave updates via Facebook and Twitter. One of the Tweets quoted on the live text was: '**15:58: [mtotowajirani](#)** on Twitter: Most international media focussing on "voting amid tight security". They're itching for bloodshed...NOT happening!' One of the last live text entries quoted US President Obama commenting on the Kenyan elections while in a town hall meeting with Kenyan community members. The live text ended at 17.00, at the close of the poll.

The two papers once again used live text to report the promulgation of the new constitution on 27 August 2010, employing similar strategies of coverage – from the beginning to the end of the ceremony. One highlight of these live text reports was breaking news on an unexpected guest. The Nation reported: '**09:16am** - Surprise as Sudan President Omar al Bashir arrives for the ceremony. He is

wanted by the International Criminal Court at The Hague for war crimes in Darfur.’ This was followed up with a quote of the Foreign Affairs minister on the matter. The Standard live text quoted a known human rights lawyer: ‘**10:00[EAT]** - Your Say: "I am seated in a dais metres away from the main dais. The mood is, sorry, was great and palpable until the indictee Bashir walked in. How embarassing for us! Am ashamed to have this man among us on this Day. Haroun Ndubi”.’ An interesting entry in the Nation live text related to the Kenyan Prime Minister: ‘**1:07pm** - Something interesting to note: Raila is a trending topic worldwide on the social media network Twitter. This must be big.’ The Nation live text ended with an invitation to view their gallery of pictures relating to the event, and download President Kibaki’s speech. The Standard live text ended with one of the last entries rather loaded: ‘**12:53[EAT]** - Kibaki just entered his fuel guzzler...there he goes.’ This form of immediacy and networked-convergent reporting had not been routine before 2010.

The online news and commentaries on Kenya by Kenyans, whether mainstream or alternative journalists, reflect the generic characteristics of similar outputs in other parts of Africa and the world. Characteristics include immediate publishing, time-stamping, provision of some kind of contact for the author and provision for comment by the reader which could result in transformation of the text (including audio and video formats). One common feature is cross-referencing of texts between mainstream and alternative media forums and platforms.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article, we have employed qualitative content analysis and genre analysis in a bid to integrate discursive and professional practices of journalism, linking intra-textual and extra-textual aspects as per Bhatia (2008). The global, national, institutional, organizational and professional contexts have been taken into account in analyzing the transformation of journalism practice and culture in Africa with a focus on Kenya, especially the two leading newspapers. The findings are that there remain issues around accuracy and trustworthiness of



certain online alternative media – but this affects mainstream media as much. For this reason, Kenya’s two leading dailies have made attempts to enhance openness and accountability by trying to be as forthright as possible about their sourcing. There are also attempts to include less powerful voices – although the usual elite sources still dominate. In addition, there are attempts to adopt live, networked and converged reporting – especially during major events. Finally, the Kenyan mainstream media appear to be playing catch-up, in terms of technology use, with local alternative practitioners as well as global players.

It is worth noting that the mainstream media journalists or their editors have yet to actively engage with the reader, for instance by responding to some of the comments posted at the end of stories. This is not unique to Kenya or Africa as most journalists and editors simply do not have the time engage in such dialogue, but it does undermine the logic of such a generic provision. Another matter of interest is the increasing role of and interest in social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, which will be crucial in the 2012 Kenyan elections.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> See Bombastic Elements blog entry: Assange on WikiLeaks and the 2007 Kenyan Election, URL (accessed 5 December 2010): <http://bombasticelements.blogspot.com/2010/07/kenya-assange-on-wikileaks-2007-kenyan.html>

<sup>ii</sup> See: 'Three '08 Students Win Entrepreneurial Journalism Contest', URL (accessed 22 January 2011): <http://www.journalism.cuny.edu/2008/12/23/three-08-grads-win-entrepreneurial-journalism-prizes/>

<sup>iii</sup> Based on various reports from the websites of *Sudan Tribune*, AllAfrica.com, Reporters Sans Frontières.

<sup>iv</sup> Titled, 'A certain tenacity: Mozambique, Namibia and Kenya'

<sup>v</sup> Sunday Nation Reporter, 'We are Free to Return to Kenya: Artur Brothers', *Sunday Nation*, 20 November 2010, URL (accessed 20 November 2010): [www.nation.co.ke/News/We%20are%20free%20to%20return%20to%20Kenya%20say%20Artur%20brothers%20/-/1056/1057428/-/lopofl/-/index.html](http://www.nation.co.ke/News/We%20are%20free%20to%20return%20to%20Kenya%20say%20Artur%20brothers%20/-/1056/1057428/-/lopofl/-/index.html)

<sup>vi</sup> Samuel Siringi, 'Family Deep in Ngilu's Troubled Waters', *Sunday Nation*, 21 November 2010, URL (accessed 21 November 2010): [www.nation.co.ke/News/politics/Family%20deep%20in%20Ngilu%20troubled%20waters/-/1064/1057406/-/tvjccdz/-/index.html](http://www.nation.co.ke/News/politics/Family%20deep%20in%20Ngilu%20troubled%20waters/-/1064/1057406/-/tvjccdz/-/index.html)

<sup>vii</sup> Various posts from mid November 2010 by, among others, Rallycrashes88, URL (accessed 17 November 2010): [www.youtube.com/user/rallycrashes88](http://www.youtube.com/user/rallycrashes88)

<sup>viii</sup> Various posts from January 2011, URL (accessed January 2011): Capital FM Kenya Youtube Channel, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyzYZQ7m7iI>; Kenyan List, <http://kenyanlist.com/kls-listing-show.php?id=52266>; CastTV, [www.casttv.com/video/t1hz4fm/traffic-cop-motorist-in-highway-brawl-video](http://www.casttv.com/video/t1hz4fm/traffic-cop-motorist-in-highway-brawl-video)

<sup>ix</sup> Examples: [www.kenyamoto2.com](http://www.kenyamoto2.com) , [www.jumptv.com](http://www.jumptv.com) and [www.africastv](http://www.africastv)

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