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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Journalism from the 'Silicon Savannah': The Vexed Relationship Between Nairobi's Newsmakers and its ICT4D Community

Nicholas Benequista\*

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During the course of a year-long knowledge exchange initiative called the Networked News Lab, a small group of Kenyan journalists and a PhD researcher from the London School of Economics and Political Science sought to identify opportunities for collaboration between newsmakers and practitioners from the field of information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D). In almost every instance, the project failed to promote cooperation between the two groups, though it succeeded in highlighting the fundamental issues that separate them. Drawing from interviews, project documents and participant observation, this chapter describes the incompatibilities between the two communities and what they suggest about current efforts to strengthen journalism in Africa through the application of ICTs.

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## Introduction

The debate over journalism's future has a unique complexion in Kenya, where dismay over mainstream coverage of recent national events has spurred many activists to place their hope in the ability of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to perform the public service functions that have typically been provided by broadcasters and newspapers.

Kenya is fertile ground for those who wish to experiment with the potential of ICTs to amplify citizen voices and to promote government accountability. M-Pesa, M-Farm, iCow, Ushahidi: Kenya has been a leader amongst its peers in Sub-Saharan Africa in generating enterprises that use the country's

rapidly expanding infrastructure of digital communication. As a result, the country counts upon a vibrant and skilled community of expert developers.

Still, mainstream television, radio and print remain (and will remain for some time) the main sources of information and opinion for the majority of Kenyans, particularly those outside of the capital. It is not at all clear whether and how Kenya's community of digital activists has influenced the content and practices of these media outlets. Neither the literature emanating from the field of ICT4D, nor from the field of media development, adequately accounts for how technological change (especially the rapid expansion of mobile phone telephony) might best support forms of 'journalism' that underpin stronger accountability of the state to citizens – not least of all in countries with elements of fragility.

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To be fair, many of the initiatives in Kenya's ICTs for development (ICT4D) sector can achieve their aims without any need to influence mainstream media (iCow comes to mind). In projects where the ambition is to amplify citizen voice or to contribute to a more democratic public sphere, however, it should be essential for the project to clearly understand its role vis-à-vis mainstream media. What is happening to journalism in Africa's so-called 'Silicon Savannah'?

I set out to examine this issue for my PhD, but not just as a passive observer. With funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council and from the Dar es Salaam-based organization Twaweza, I established the Networked News Lab in 2013 to actively explore the possibilities that Kenya's media ecosystem, including a robust ICT4D sector, creates for journalists.

The observations made during the year that the Networked News Lab initially operated suggest that there are fundamental issues that prevent Kenya's Silicon Savannah from having any significant pass-on effects on what is often called mainstream journalism, as practiced by Kenya's large and often long-standing media houses. Indeed, these differences frustrate even deliberate and considered interventions by practitioners of ICT4D and media development (and by this author) to influence the practice of journalism.

Yet these failures are also instructive; they challenge the myths surrounding the potential of ICTs, and point us towards a more critical view of the potential for ICTs to promote forms of journalism that perform a stronger public service function.

This contribution is divided into four sections. It first summarizes the explicit (and sometimes implied) perspectives on ICTs and journalism in Africa. It then describes the Networked News Lab's approach, offering three detailed examples of how that project failed to foster collaborative relationships between journalists and those working within the field of ICT4D, even on shared

interests such as government accountability and transparency. It concludes with a discussion of what these failures reveal about the weaknesses in our understanding of the relationship between ICTs and journalism.

### **Media development, ICT4D and journalism in Africa**

Media development refers to a range of activities, usually carried out in Southern countries with funding from Northern countries, designed to improve the capacity of private, community, public, and/or state media and to promote media independence and pluralism. According to recent estimates, official overseas aid and private donations for media development activities total about \$900 million a year.<sup>1</sup>

But media development is not just a field of practice; it is also a field of applied study, subsidiary to a larger body of theory on the contribution of the media to democratization and development. Distinct schools of thought within media development reflect their affinities to different democratic theories, with implications for intervention strategies (see Benson 2010; Gurevitch and Blumler 1990; Voltmer 2006 for in-depth discussions). Unfortunately, as a field for generating applied theory, media development has considerable constraints. Owing to funding issues, much of the original research conducted expressly for the purposes of media development has been limited in scope and has focused on the outcomes of specific interventions at the neglect of the bigger picture (Arsenault and Powers 2010).

Perhaps reflecting this weakness, the media development literature has been conspicuously silent on more recent debates over the potential of new communication technologies to restructure relations of power embedded in production and consumption of news media. By new communication technologies, I mean those that create interactive, horizontal networks of communication built around the Internet and wireless communication (Castells 2009).

As Natalie Fenton warns in the introduction to *New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age*:

We should remember that the history of communications technology shows us that if innovative content and forms of production appear in the early stages of a new technology and offer potential for radical change this is more often than not cancelled out or appropriated by the most powerful institutions operating within dominant technological and socio-political paradigms. "Newness" of form and content is quickly smothered by predominance, size and wealth. But history does not always repeat itself (Fenton 2010: 13).

ICTs for development, which has in recent practice often been blurred with media development activities, refers to a field of practice, populated by many new development actors such as the Omidyar Network and Google.org, that seeks to bridge the 'digital divide:' to increase access in the south to technologies that are readily available in the north. Early considerations in this area suffered from the classic pitfalls of technology transfer, but the research and practice in the field of ICT4D is now increasingly concerned with mediated adoption, which is described as the 'unique applications and uses of new technologies emerging in different corners of the developing world' (Centre of Governance and Human Rights 2007: 2).

As old questions arise around access, inequality, power and the quality of information in new media, African scholars are increasingly calling for 'a more critical rethink of the social and political impact of new technologies on the African polity' (Banda, Mudhai, and Tettey 2009). Yet, when it comes to the impact of technology on African journalism, empirical research is quite scarce, and many of the attempts to theorize on this topic are still characterized by excessive

optimism about the possibilities presented by technology.

Scholars such as Folu Ogundimu and Francis Nyamnjoh, for example, have suggested that ICTs may provide the needed solution to the weakness of a liberal democratic press. Whilst they acknowledge that ICTs are often delivered in neo-colonial packages, they argue that the key challenge lies in finding ways that indigenize these technologies, a position which is consistent with the notion of mediated adoption:

If theories of African media could pay closer attention to the creative usages of ICTs by ordinary Africans, African media practitioners could begin to think less of professional media, including journalism, in the conventional sense, and more of seeking ways to blend the information and communication cultures of the general public with their conventional canon and practices, to give birth to a conventional-cum-citizen journalism that is of greater relevance to Africa and its predicaments. (Nyamnjoh 2011: 30)

This perspective resonates with the story of how *Ushahidi* emerged in Kenya amidst the violence of the 2007 elections (Goldstein and Rotich 2008).<sup>2</sup> The hope, articulated by these scholars for a local alternative to the liberal democratic press, also echoes in the way that *Ushahidi* is evoked to remind the country that digital activists can document what journalists in Kenya's large commercial media houses supposedly will not or cannot.

This was implicit in the depictions of *Ushahidi*'s deployment for the 2013 elections. *Uchaguzi* (Swahili for elections) was an elections and conflict monitoring initiative that relied on the *Ushahidi* crowd-sourcing platform (implemented by the organization of the same name) as a central resource for gathering information, coordinating action and communicating with

stakeholders, which included the National Steering Committee for Peace and Security.

The portrayal of that project by international journalists such as Michela Wrong<sup>3</sup> and by funding agencies like Hivos<sup>4</sup> emphasize how the initiative mobilizes the youthful vigour and idealism of its volunteers against the country's intractable governance problems. As Michela Wrong writes: 'The geeks in the iHub—urban, hyper-educated and distinctly Western in their outlook—and their methods represent a generational challenge to an electoral system that feels sclerotic and stuck in the past, despite a new Constitution that reconfigures state structures.'

As the cases described below will further attest, the perceived vibrancy and idealism of those working in digital media is often contrasted with the view of mainstream commercial media as corrupt, irresponsible and politicized. While the ambitions of the tech community in Nairobi have not explicitly included a retooling of journalism, recent developments, such as the seemingly muted response of the press to renewed allegations of vote-rigging in the 2013 elections (Benequista 2014) and a media law expected to have a chilling effect on journalistic independence, have bolstered the opinion that digital media have a role to play in revitalizing the news industry. Many journalists within mainstream commercial media also agree with this assessment. Theory from the field of media development and from ICT4D, however, sheds little light on the process by which a 'conventional-cum-citizen journalism that is of greater relevance to Africa' will arise. It gives perhaps even less guidance on how the strategic application of ICTs – carried out by practitioners in these fields – can be expected to promote forms of journalism that provide a stronger public service function. Still, there are some theories of change *implied* by the range of efforts in Kenya intended to either strengthen or compensate for the weaknesses of mainstream commercial media houses.

Scoping the ICT-enabled initiatives for transparency and accountability in Kenya,

one finds an array of implicit ideas about where these fit in the wider media ecosystem. On one end of the spectrum is the view that digital media should replace old media: that it will assume the responsibilities that old media cannot, or will not, fulfil. On the other side is the belief that the technology provides a tool to transform newsrooms from the inside. There are a range of opinions in between, including the view that independent, digital platforms – like the parliamentary watchdog website Mzalendo – might contribute both directly and indirectly to a more informed debate in the press.

One might separate this range of views into two distinct camps. First, there are those who emphasize the antagonistic aspects of the relationship between old media and new. Elsewhere, this has been described as the 'disruptive' power of new media; we will call proponents of this perspective the rebels. The rebels emphasize how digital technologies pose a threat to the standard business models and practices in mainstream news (Lewis 2012; Anderson 2008). The organizers of the Map Kibera Trust and the *Ushahidi* platform might be called rebels, as founders of potentially disruptive ICT projects.

These initiatives make three major assumptions about how their work might have an influence on mainstream commercial journalism. The first is that being supported, as they often are, by grant funding and volunteerism makes them less vulnerable to commercial and political interference. Second, they presume to provide a form of demand-side accountability on mainstream media, whereby the silences and absences on mainstream media will be more apparent, and hence harder to sustain, when juxtaposed with the alternative, digitally-enabled forms of journalism. These initiatives also expect that the information and perspectives that they present will find a path into mainstream journalism, either because journalists will directly take an interest in their work, or perhaps because news sources (analysts and spokespeople, etc.) will.

The other camp, which we will term the collaborators, emphasizes the more complementary, or 'networked' relationships that have emerged through the convergence of print, broadcast and digital media, and which have spawned a variety of new journalistic specialties: crowd-sourced journalism, citizen journalism, data journalism, etc. (Beckett 2008; Asiedu 2012; Mudhai 2011). Networked journalism makes use of new media technology (wikis, blogs and social networking, Twitter, etc.) in combination with traditional journalistic practices. To cite a blog in a newspaper article, to include an online message board for reader's comments, to publish a photo or video submitted by an ordinary citizen: these are all basic forms of networked journalism. Networked journalism, however, need not rely on citizen access to Web 2.0 technologies. To engage with a public that extends beyond a small urban middle class, networked journalism in Kenya is likely to rely on SMS and other mobile phone technologies in conjunction with web platforms. In Kenya, collaborator-led projects include Al Jazeera's now defunct Sauti Project, which attempted to cultivate a network of citizen journalists, and Code4Kenya, which attempted to build data journalism desks in Nairobi newsrooms.

These collaborative initiatives make their own three assumptions about how the application of new digital technologies can promote a stronger public service function in mainstream journalism. First, they assume that the weaknesses they perceive in mainstream news coverage arise because journalists are uninformed or lack evidence to make a case. Collaborator projects also often assume that a lack of technical knowledge in newsrooms is a barrier to the innovative use of ICTs in reporting: that journalists would use digital communication technologies more if they only knew how, or had institutional support to do so. Finally, the collaborators assume that the use of digital communication technologies strengthens journalism by altering the procedures governing the production of

news: making the work of the reporter more efficient and inclusive.

By seeking to promote a hybrid of citizen journalism and mainstream professional journalism, the Networked News Lab initially pursued a strategy that would make it a collaborator project. As an emerging practice, 'networked journalism' has no standard formula; the Networked News Lab sought to find a unique recipe for the Kenyan context. The starting point was to be a series of collaborations between journalists and those who are working to establish more participatory forms of mediated communication in Kenya.

In this sense, the Networked News Lab made other assumptions. It assumed that participating journalists would have an interest to work in partnership to experiment with innovative forms of news reporting, and would have the autonomy to pursue that interest. It also assumed that ICT4D projects with aims shared by mainstream journalists (i.e. for public accountability and informing the public) would be eager for an opportunity to collaborate more closely with journalists, and that their initiatives could be modified to accommodate this collaboration.

The sections below will describe how these assumptions proved to be untrue and how the vexed relationship between journalists and members of the ICT4D community raises questions about some of the other assumptions, mentioned above. These assumptions underpin the efforts to harness ICTs as tools to resolve the perceived failure of Kenyan media to adequately perform its public service function.

### **The Networked News Lab**

The Networked News Lab, the project from which observations for this article were drawn, attempted to create a forum where technological innovations and conceptual insights could be explored, experimented with and assessed by leading journalists. The Lab was created in the spirit of action research derived from the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire, and particularly from his notion of *praxis*, which has been

variously applied in the fields of journalism and communication (Hochheimer 1992; Grundy 1982; Einsiedel 1999).

Nine journalists, representing a range of mediums and media houses, were selected as core members of the Networked News Lab. Activists, programmers and other journalists also participated in the project.

Through the Networked News Lab, I set out to equip this group of accomplished journalists with the knowledge and networks needed to experiment with novel reporting techniques. They were meant to access new sources of data and statistics, to connect with people who could not have been reached previously, to collaborate with citizen journalists and to use crowd-sourcing platforms, social media and innovative survey techniques (while, of course, still going out to speak with people in person).

Having received modest funding, the project endeavoured to connect the journalists with existing resources, which seemed a feasible approach in Nairobi given the number of innovative applications of information and communication technology to which the city is host.

Bringing practitioners of old and new media into a dialogue, and potentially into collaboration, was expected to yield critical insights into whether digitally mediated communication projects in Kenya offer something that mainstream media cannot. When journalists incorporate the use of ICTs in their reporting, do they make their work more transparent and more open to public scrutiny? By using ICTs innovatively in their reporting, are journalists enabled to include sources or perspectives that would not have been included otherwise? Do they tell the stories differently—better in some way—from their peers who are using more traditional techniques to cover the same story? The participating journalists promised to give the 'story behind the story,' which was expected to also reveal how newsroom politics and other forms of power may have helped to shape a story.

The primary objective of the project was learning: what works and what does not, and why? The data to answer these questions was to come from journalists' reflections in participatory workshops, from the news texts they produced, and from ethnographic notes. As such, the project was expected to succeed even if the use of new communication technologies failed to produce anything new. But the project failed in an unexpected way. The journalists and ICT experts simply did not collaborate.

In spite of this, the project still served as a basis for an extended research project. Indeed, the effort generated reams of field notes emanating from interviews and interactions with journalists, developers, bloggers, activists and others—more than enough data to support a PhD dissertation and several other publications, including this article.

Reflecting back on the experience, it is clear that the project's failure had many causes, some more mundane than others.

The first is happenstance. As the national election in March 2013 approached, journalists in the network were either completely engrossed in the coverage or (for those who do not cover politics) sidelined by the event.

A second cause is related to how the journalists were selected for participation in the project. The network members were chosen with the aid of an advisory group that had identified journalists with exceptional talent and commitment. Whether they were interested in technological innovation in journalism was a secondary concern, and many of those selected later revealed that they were not as enthusiastic about the use of technology as they had initially indicated (with a few exceptions).

The failure may also relate to how the project was managed. The project took an entirely bottom-up approach. Most efforts to promote innovative journalism—such as the trainings hosted by Internews Kenya<sup>5</sup> or the World Bank-supported Code4Kenya<sup>6</sup> project—are arranged with senior editors or managers, who (in the case of Internews

trainings) assign journalists to participate or who make commitments on behalf of the institution (in the case of Code4Kenya).

The supervisors at the media houses that employed the journalists participating in the Networked News Lab gave their consent, but were never actively involved. As a result, there was no institutional support for the journalists' participation, and their supervisors certainly did not put them under any pressure to innovate their reporting practices. Amid the significant time constraints faced by Kenyan journalists, it was ambitious to ask them to contribute their time to this project for little more than the pleasure of participating.

Still, the semi-autonomous nature of the journalists' participation in the Networked News Lab, which was a necessity from a research standpoint in any case, may not be inherently ill suited for a project with concrete objectives. The project gleaned lessons on how to effectively use research to spur action by journalists, though many of these lessons were learnt too late.

The fourth and final factor that explains the project's failure to promote collaboration, which provides the focus of the rest of this article, relates to the vexed relationship between journalists in Kenya and the country's ICT4D community.

This article argues that the inability to foster collaboration between journalists and practitioners of ICT4D reflects fundamental differences in the perspectives and institutional motivations of these two groups that are often ignored to the detriment of projects that seek to strengthen journalism or amplify citizen voice through the deployment of ICTs.

### Three failures

Early in the Networked News Lab, the participating journalists were asked to express their ambitions for their own work and to articulate their personal view of journalism's role in Kenyan society. Among other objectives, this exercise was intended to help match the

journalists with ICT4D projects that might share their ambitions.

Where matches were made, the project facilitator attempted a kind of shuttle diplomacy to find the right 'fit' between the journalist and the ICT4D project. Such a fit seemed feasible in several cases and in these instances both parties were encouraged to come together. By the end of the project, some of the journalists had used the support of the Networked News Lab to experiment within their own institutions and projects, but none had done so in collaboration with outside organizations.

This chapter will describe three of these cases, one each from television, radio and print. The cases presented here are those that generated some of the most relevant insights. While the failure to engineer collaboration itself may not be significant—it is difficult to rule out the possibility that the attempt was merely mismanaged—each case does highlight some of the fundamental differences that separate journalism from ICT4D.

### Incompatible approaches to telling *their* story

James Smart, a nightly news anchor and talk show host who moved from Nation Television (NTV) to Kenyan Television Network (KTN), cited his own humble upbringing as a strong motivating factor for his journalism. James won awards for his investigation into a fuel pipeline explosion that claimed more than 100 lives and destroyed an informal settlement in the Sinai area of Nairobi. He also pioneered the use of social media on a television talk show with NTV's *The Trend*, which was inspired by Al Jazeera's *The Stream*.

In several conversations, James emphasized his desire to make media a more plural and democratic space in Kenya:

This person lives this life and they trust me enough to tell me the details of their life, they let me in their life and I would like to, at the very least,



tell their story the way they would tell it if they had the opportunity. And that has been my struggle, because for me, I think, it's different. Because I've been there. So I understand, and I think it's a long journey.

The desire to allow others, especially those living in slums, to tell their own story is certainly shared by Map Kibera, a project that began as a pilot to test the use of open source mapping technologies in Nairobi's largest slum. Software is considered open source when its licensing ensures the availability and free distribution of its source code, though the term is also associated with an approach to software development that allows users to participate in the process and with a wider movement that puts forward openness, freedom and a culture of reciprocity as key values in technological progress (Berdou 2007).

Map Kibera was founded by two Americans who have been influenced by the open source movement and who run an international social enterprise called Ground Truth, which is dedicated to the use of open software tools for promoting democracy and development. At its inception, Map Kibera used low-cost GPS devices to collect geographically located data on issues like health, water and sanitation, security and education (i.e. the location of water taps, toilets, schools, working street lights, etc.). Uploaded onto the OpenStreetMap platform, this data creates an interactive digital map of the slum. The project eventually expanded its remit to include citizen journalism with the initiation of Voices of Kibera (primarily images and text) and the Kibera News Network (primarily videos), which use the Ushahidi and Wordpress platforms, respectively.

According to interviews with a founder and executive director of Map Kibera, the approach to 'citizen journalism' in which content is produced exclusively by volunteers was not sustainable in Kibera, where youth looked to the project as an opportunity for

employment. According to an independent evaluation of the project conducted by the Institute of Development Studies, expectations of compensation became a further point of contention because the organization had been paying its mappers (Musyoki 2010).

Linking Map Kibera to the commercial media market was also problematic. In an interview for the Networked News Lab, one of the organization's founders said that a particular incident had soured the appetite for collaboration with national media. A Map Kibera citizen journalist thought that he or she was selling the right to reproduce a video clip of post-election violence to Nation Media Group (NMG), the country's largest media conglomerate, but NMG appeared to sell the rights to reproduce the video to others in turn, without any further compensation to the original author. Commercializing the content also clashed with the project's 'open source' ethos and its ambitions to make information about the Kibera community widely available.

Map Kibera Trust was later established in order to seek funds to compensate the contributors to Voices of Kibera and the Kibera News Network on a per piece basis. 'Personally, I think having grant-funded media is OK. It's OK if it's not all private,' said one of the trust's founders.

In interviews, individuals involved with Map Kibera and its affiliated citizen journalism projects have repeatedly expressed their concerns about national media. They characterized national media as 'corrupt,' as seeking bribes for coverage. They have also alternatively described national media as either intent on hiding Kibera, or as portraying it according to preconceived notions of Kibera as a place of violence and destitution. Indeed, national media have not given Map Kibera and its networks the fraction of the coverage it has received from international media organizations. This is clear from the list of Map Kibera's media coverage on its Wiki,<sup>7</sup> and from the list of individuals who follow Map Kibera's Twitter feed.<sup>8</sup>

When approached about a possible collaboration by the Networked News Lab, Map Kibera was open to the discussion, but reminded the researcher of these challenges. A specific collaboration, however, was never formerly proposed, owing partly to the issues at Map Kibera described above, and partly to James' particular concerns for his show.

James was interested in bolstering the inclusiveness of social media participation on his show. He would bring on high-level officials and politicians and direct some of the questions and comments curated from Twitter to these individuals. His experience taught him that the use of social media would allow him to direct critical questions at people in power without the risk of being accused of bias. He had this to say about the journalist's relationship with new media:

I think there is space for both traditional media and new media to, you know, kind of interact. And produce one product. What I think for me as a challenge is to find the means and ways that I can incorporate the many voices that are out there into whatever piece that I am doing so that we are working together for this final piece. And then it's just the same thing as before, except that now it's different. Before people used to pick up phones and call people, now everyone is somewhere and you can pick up their thoughts at any given time. So I think this is the challenge that new media is posing to traditional media, and if we find better and faster ways of incorporating that into things that we do, so that they are part of the process, because we are the professionals. At the end of the day what they want us to do is stories, good stories, about them.

The problem, he found, was that his guests would dismiss the social media commentary as coming from a narrow band of

middle-class youth in Nairobi. Furthermore, James found the quality of the commentary to be lacking. Allowing viewers to send commentary to the show by SMS seemed the obvious option. James received support from the Networked News Lab that would allow him and his team to screen and select SMS messages that could be broadcast in the feed at the bottom of the screen. But James was tied to using his channel's short code, which has always been viewed as a source of revenue for the station, rather than a tool for public participation. At an additional Ksh. 15 (US\$0.17) to the carrier's cost of sending the SMS text message, KTN's short code presented its own barrier.

To address the issue of quality, the Networked News Lab coordinator contacted representatives of civil society networks that might be able to mobilize informed citizens to participate in the show. If, hypothetically, James hosted the Minister of Health, it would be useful to have a few pre-identified individuals with relevant experience ready to post questions from different parts of the country: nurses, health activists, representatives of groups representing the disabled, etc. None of the civil society networks contacted, however, had the capacity or motivation to facilitate citizen participation. We determined that such a network would have to be built by the journalist himself. The show, however, was cancelled when the end of the election season dampened demand for political news, and the opportunity to facilitate more informed audience participation was lost.

### **Disincentives to collaborate on accountability**

Francis Luchivya has spent the better part of his long career as an advocate of 'voice of the people' journalism. Though he's best known for his role as host of Radio Citizen's morning show, *Jambo Kenya*, two of his other projects at Citizen better represent his long-standing commitment to doing journalism on grassroots issues.

Making use of satellite transmission technology only recently put into use by Kenyan journalists, *Ajenda ya Maguezi* (The Reform Agenda) has taken Francis to more than 70 towns across the country to host live-to-air town hall discussions about local and national political issues. *Kilio cha Haki* (A Cry for Justice) is a short segment running now for three years that each week brings to light an injustice from a different part of the country. Francis gathers the stories during his travels for *Ajenda*, but also just as often by text message. During *Jambo Kenya*, which has as many as 11 million listeners during its five-hour duration, he solicits stories of injustice. Out of the more than 2,000 SMS texts the show receives in the morning, about 10 are usually worthy of follow-up, he says.<sup>9</sup>

Francis' shows and his objectives seemed to have an affinity to the work that the Social Development Network (SODNET) had been doing with its Huduma platform, 'a strategic approach and a tool that was developed in response to the need to improve public service delivery by amplifying voices of citizens to authorities' (Thigo 2013).

Since Huduma debuted in 2011, its deployment has evolved. It was initially intended as a way of crowd-sourcing citizen complaints and service delivery failures so that civil society organizations could more effectively apply pressure. This model, however, proved to be unsuccessful in Kenya.<sup>10</sup>

According to one of the project's founders, many complaints went unresolved, such as a sewer rupture in the Nairobi neighbourhood of Embakasi that was not repaired for months. The project did document some early accomplishments, but the general lack of response from officials eventually contributed to the waning flow of reports to the site. Huduma also experienced technical problems in its initial deployment that may have hampered its uptake.

The project's organizers have since attempted to partner directly with the service providers to help them to adopt Huduma as a monitoring tool for their own strategies

to strengthen pro-poor service delivery. 'Politicians want credit; technocrats want things to work. So that's where we've shifted our focus,' said one of the project's founders said while discussing a possible collaboration with members of the Networked News Lab.

SODNET said it might be willing to work on a pilot basis with Francis and other journalists from the Networked News Lab. During a preliminary discussion, it was suggested that SODNET might be able to help Francis to identify issues in the towns he visits for *Ajenda ya Maguezi*, or that the Huduma platform might strengthen the work of *Kilio cha Haki* with the groundwork the organization had done to map the networks of responsibility for service provision around the country. SODNET, it was clear, could in turn benefit from the exposure that Francis offers (*Jambo Kenya* claims it has about 11 million listeners each morning). But the collaboration never went beyond the hypothetical.

Francis reviewed Huduma's website and considered their suggestions, but he remained sceptical. He was concerned about what he thought to be technical glitches on the platform. He was also uncertain of whether it would be possible to share the SMS messages received on Citizen's short code with Huduma, or, alternatively, whether Citizen would be willing to use Huduma's short code. Citizen should not be seen to be 'advertising' for Huduma. But Francis' biggest misgiving was whether Huduma could be helpful to him at all.

Both of his shows have succeeded in winning some accountability from officials, according to Francis. Local politicians, who sometimes attend *Ajenda*, have made promises and, occasionally, amends. Crimes have been investigated, and even prosecuted, as a result of his broadcasts. Corrupt officials have been sacked or charged. Some of the issues raised on his show may seem minor, but reflect larger issues, like in the instance of a patient who had been at Kenyatta Hospital for 48 hours without being attended to by

a doctor. When the show aired his phoned-in commentary, he was finally attended, though the segment also drew attention to the country's overburdened medical system.

Though there was certainly potential for collaboration between Huduma and Citizen, neither side was eager for it, and this became just another one of the initiatives of the Networked News Lab that floundered before it even began.

### **Seeking truth in numbers, just not the same truth**

By his own account, Abdi Latif Dahir, a freelance writer who got his start with the *Daily Nation* and *Business Daily*, is most attracted to the story-telling aspects of journalism. For that reason, he has repeatedly returned to first person or narrative forms of journalism, such as in the essay 'Last Word: A Return to Mogadishu' that he wrote for the pan-African magazine *The Africa Report*.<sup>11</sup> 'It's not just about writing,' Abdi said at a Networked News Lab gathering. 'It's about a systematic kind of writing. Like, what are you getting out of the story?'

Abdi began to use writing as a form of reflection when his mother moved him and his brother to Mogadishu from Nairobi in 1997, six years after the collapse of Siad Barre's government and at a time when many families were still fleeing the city and country in seek of refuge. She asked Abdi and his brother to keep diaries of what they witnessed, and then would ask them each month what they thought the observations recorded in their diaries meant.

As a Somali-speaking Kenyan, Abdi has other reasons to be sensitive to what the audience might be 'getting out of the story.' Abdi's collaborations with the Networked News Lab have often been motivated by a desire to challenge dominant portrayals of Somali-speakers in the Kenyan press—of the Somalis who have long inhabited the country's northeast, and of the communities in Nairobi established in great part by those escaping the civil war in Somalia.

Abdi has already used the possibilities of the new digital landscape to challenge popular representations of ethnic Somalis and issues concerning Somalia in Eastern Africa; he co-founded the *Sahan Journal*,<sup>12</sup> working on a completely voluntary basis for the joy of giving perspectives on news topics that might otherwise be ignored.

Abdi's opinions on old and new media are coloured too by his belief in narrative, as he suggests in this comment:

It's how they [old media and new] are going to reinforce each other. I don't know if you read the last print issue of Newsweek and how Brown was like, it's not about the magazine going out of business; it's the bold journalism behind it. So long as the story is good, people will keep reading.

At one point, Abdi expressed an interest in 'data journalism,' a title given to an assortment of emerging journalistic practices that take advantage of the ever-expanding availability of data in the digital age. Data journalism can range from the use of infographics to the application of complex statistical methods. Abdi was most excited about the possibility of using economic data to investigate the effect of administrative devolution, ushered in by the 2010 Constitution, on Kenya's northern counties. The Kenya Open Data Initiative,<sup>13</sup> an initiative endorsed by then President Mwai Kibaki to make government data available on a single web portal, would have been an obvious source of data, but a look at the website in June 2013 confirmed what had been said elsewhere: that government data was not being posted to the database in a timely fashion.<sup>14</sup>

In the hope of finding data that was more current, the Networked News Lab brought together Abdi with a representative of the Kenyan office of the Dutch NGO Hivos, which had been advertising a project intended to promote the use of data by journalists. Hivos had been given charge of a

database compiled largely from World Bank research on service delivery across Kenya complemented with smaller datasets from other sources. Unfortunately, there was no data at all from the northeast—from Wajir or Marsabit counties. It had been 'too dangerous' for researchers to collect information there, the representative of Hivos said. In truth, however, even if the data had existed, it would have likely only served to highlight the failings of service delivery in those regions. While Abdi is not adverse to this angle, he had a different story in mind.

Abdi was interested to see whether private investment in the northern counties was rising. Anecdotally, Abdi had heard that affluent individuals from the northeast had decided to invest more of their money in the region in anticipation of devolution. Such a trend would have economic and political ramifications worth reporting. He felt he could get access to the data himself. Indeed, he was certain that would be the only way to tell the story he wanted to tell. Abdi's interests drifted toward other activities after that, however, and the effort was never made to collect the data.

### **The vexed question of ICTs and journalism in Kenya**

The assumption of the Networked News Lab was that the journalists, who were all highly accomplished, would be i) interested to work in partnership to explore innovative forms of news reporting, and would have the autonomy to pursue that interest. It was also expected that ii) the ICT4D practitioners would be eager to take the opportunity to work with mainstream media to pursue shared objectives.

This, however, was not the case. In each case, journalists either did not have the interest or autonomy to work in partnership, or ICT4D practitioners were wary of collaboration, or both. The failure to promote cooperation between these two communities speaks to more than the shortcomings of the Networked News Lab's model; it also

highlights the fundamental differences between the two groups emanating from their professional perspectives and institutional structures, and provides a critical view of the potential for actors to deliberately and strategically deploy ICTs in efforts to address the shortcomings of mainstream commercial media.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, one of the fundamental assumptions underpinning ICT4D's potential is its independence from commercial or political interference. While ICT4D projects undoubtedly operate within a distinct political economy from mainstream media houses, the experience of the Networked News Lab suggests that they are nonetheless constrained by their own funding strategies and operational partnerships, and that this is one of the major obstacles to collaboration. Huduma, Map Kibera, Uchaguzi and others rely on access to governments, to communities and to partner organizations to gather the data they require. These relationships are notoriously difficult to maintain, and the wrong kind of news story could put these relationships under stress. This is but one way that ICT4D's own political economy can make it wary of a greater media presence.

Collaboration too is blocked by the institutional structures of mainstream journalism. As in the case of KTN and Citizen, journalists who want to 'crowd-source' audience participation are often obligated to do so using their own institutional structures, partly for commercial interest and partly out of sense of duty to journalistic independence. Media houses routinely buy content from freelancers and news agencies, but are distrustful of anything externally funded, as Francis' concerns about Huduma suggest.

The difference between the professional perspectives of old-school journalists and new media professionals, which are often cited for their transformative potential, can also be viewed as an obstacle that requires strategic consideration. It would be difficult, for example, for any ICT4D 'rebel' to

provide content that serves the purposes of 'traditional' journalism. In their innovation, Map Kibera, Huduma and Uchaguzi have produced content that is not recognizable as 'journalism' to the journalists at mainstream commercial media houses. Their content does not follow the editorial procedures of mainstream journalism and it does not always conform to the conventional structures of 'news' as produced by mainstream commercial media. Indeed, journalists associated with the Networked News Lab did not view Map Kibera, Huduma or other ICT4D initiatives as 'journalism,' or as any form of competition, if they were even aware of their existence at all. This distrust of new media perhaps adds a new wrinkle to old debates over whether journalistic cynicism is an asset or obstacle to news that serves the public good (Cappella and Hall Jamieson 1997; Mcdevitt 2003).

Related to this, the experience of the Networked New Lab highlights a fundamental difference in the philosophical orientation of journalists and practitioners of ICT4D that presents an obstacle to collaborate. In many of the cases above, journalists demonstrate their constructivist leanings through an emphasis on narrative and on the politics of news discourse. It is the 'story' they often seek to change. By contrast, many of the ICT4D projects in Kenya seem to have a more positivist outlook, placing their conviction in the quality of the process, starting with available data rather than with the intention to challenge a particular narrative.

In addition to the failure of many ICT4D projects to adequately understand and address these politics of narrative, there is a widespread lack of understanding amongst ICT4D professionals about the politics of the newsroom. When stories matter to those in power in Kenya, editorial processes are focused on managing the pressures exerted from outside and inside the newsroom. Kenyan news is a reflection of how editors and journalists manage these tensions, and that narrows the space available for journalists to

determine which stories get told, and how. This dynamic, viewed by an outsider, might create the impression that Kenyan journalists approach their jobs cynically, when this is not always the case. Though these issues of power are often on journalists' minds, decisions are also driven by a concern for public interest and by journalistic norms—such as the imperative to seek truth, or the ethical obligation to minimize harm (Benequista 2014). Furthermore, Kenya's media industry is not monolithic; it has its own community of *rebels* – who are doing what they can to reshape their industry.

This failure to understand the politics of journalism is reflected a subtle condescension by ICT4D practitioners towards journalists. One journalist in the Networked News Lab has commented on the condescension he has felt when attending an event at the iHub (a working and meeting space frequently utilized by ICT4D practitioners), and this was evident too in some of the meetings that the Networked News Lab facilitated between journalists and representatives of the tech community. And the failure to understand the politics of journalism is reflected in the dysfunctional partnerships that undermine 'collaborator' projects. Those involved with the Code4Kenya project say its impact was blunted by one force above all: newsroom politics. Organizations like Internews Kenya—which has worked with editors, managers and journalists for years—know how to navigate this terrain, but those making novel attempts to influence the media often do not.

What emerged from the wider enquiry associated with the Networked News Lab is that journalists have an interest in expanding their own journalistic freedom, in carving an autonomous space to pursue their individual interests, which vary considerably. To be sure, some of the journalists are using digital technologies to enhance their ability to pursue their journalistic agendas. James uses social media to buttress his perceived independence when asking powerful

individuals tough questions. Francis uses SMS and satellite communication to capture voices from across the country. Abdi uses the Internet to write about stories that would otherwise be ignored by the mainstream Kenyan press. These applications of technology, however, only make sense within the wider strategies that each of them are pursuing in their institutions and in their careers to achieve their own journalistic purposes. Journalists do not use their autonomy to incorporate new technologies into their work, but they sometimes use new technologies to enhance their autonomy.

### Conclusion

While the failure of the Networked News Lab to facilitate collaboration between mainstream journalists and practitioners of ICT4D is attributable to mundane problems and happenstance, observations made in each case (including more than just the three described here) also highlight some of the fundamental differences that separate the two groups, and raise questions about the assumptions underpinning strategies to promote stronger forms of journalism through the application of ICTs.

Kenya's burgeoning ICT4D sector has, ultimately, had very little influence on mainstream commercial media. The rebels simply do not compete, while the collaborators often struggle to build lasting relationships.

ICT4D projects might be less susceptible to commercial pressures and to the distinct kind of political interference encountered at mainstream media, but they are nonetheless constrained by a unique political economy, a product of their funding scheme and operational models.

Their influence in providing a kind of demand-side accountability, or by the diffusion of new ideas and information to journalists and news sources, also appears to be attenuated by several factors, which include their existence in distinct political economies and the discord between the values and procedures of the two communities.

Assumptions underlying more collaborative approaches are also brought into question by the observations made during the Networked News Lab. New information and knowledge of ICT-enabled techniques for reporting are not the catalyst they are presumed to be within the complex dealings of newsroom politics, and within the ambitions of individual journalists.

The Networked News Lab also illustrates that media development and ICT4D, focused as they might be on specific interventions, need not neglect the larger debates about the weaknesses of the commercial press and the presumably transformative potential of ICTs for citizens. If such interventions are more capable of articulating their role in the wider media ecosystem, and of critically evaluating their influence, they could contribute significantly to our understanding of journalism's future.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Based on estimates provided by Becker and Vlad (2005) and The Center for International Media Assistance.

<sup>2</sup> Ushahidi is a crowd-sourcing platform set up by bloggers and activists to track 2007/2008 post-electoral violence in Kenya, and has since been used for electoral monitoring and crisis mapping in many other contexts. The platform's success has given rise to an international non-governmental organization by the same name that continues to play an important role today in Kenya and elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/28/geeks-for-peace/>

<sup>4</sup> See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfK5rCZT\\_EM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfK5rCZT_EM)

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://internewskenya.org>

- <sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.code4kenya.org>
- <sup>7</sup> See: [http://mapkibera.org/wiki/index.php?title=Media\\_Coverage](http://mapkibera.org/wiki/index.php?title=Media_Coverage)
- <sup>8</sup> See: [www.twitter.com/mapkibera](http://www.twitter.com/mapkibera)
- <sup>9</sup> Citizen charges an extra Ksh. 5 (US\$ 0.06) for messages sent to its short code, a third of what KTN charges.
- <sup>10</sup> As of May 2013, the Huduma platform had been deployed in a total of five countries. This research only looked at its experience in Kenya.
- <sup>11</sup> See: <http://www.theafricareport.com/Society-and-Culture/last-word-a-return-to-mogadishu.html>
- <sup>12</sup> See: <http://sahanjournal.com>
- <sup>13</sup> See: <https://www.opendata.go.ke/>
- <sup>14</sup> See: <http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2013/09/23/why-kenyas-open-data-portal-is-failing-and-why-it-can-still-succeed/>

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