

# Role of Journalists in Development: An Exploration of the Professional Autonomy of Kenyan Journalists

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## Abstract

The Kenyan media is marked by an unpredictable and changing political, social, cultural, economic and technological environment that has heavily influenced the professionalism of journalists. The journalistic work is being threatened by the political influences, the emergence of online journalism and citizen journalism which the journalists have no control over. This changing environment has brought a new threat to professionalism. In Africa, the journalist's traditional tenets - of objectivity and neutrality - are challenged and confronted by the journalist's patriotic sentiment and their ethnic and cultural belonging. The big dilemma is the seemingly declining professionalism of journalism. Given these contextual trends coupled with the structural changes in journalism as a practice, this paper explores the professional autonomy of Kenyan journalists based on a study carried out in Nairobi County which targeted 314 journalists in selected media houses in Kenya. The study used mixed method approach. Survey technique was employed to generate both quantitative and qualitative data. The data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. It was established that journalist's ethics and professional code has been fragmenting over the years and journalists no longer enjoy their professional autonomy. The aspects of being neutral, objective and acting like a mirror to the public are very weak today. These changes indicate a declining trend in journalism profession. The study established that weakening trend in journalism profession has been brought about by the occupational set up such as: long working hours, political influences, training of journalists, emergence of online and citizen journalisms and new social networks. This weakening trend in journalism profession warrants an urgent intervention on journalists' conduct, review of the training content and existing regulatory policies by the Media council of Kenya.

**Keywords:** *professionalism, autonomy, journalism, Kenya*

## Introduction

There are different perspectives on the definition of the terms "profession" and "professionalism." Frederick Mosher (1982), as the dominant journalism scholar to break ground in identifying the characteristics and dimensions of professionalism in American society, defines a profession as "a reasonably clear-cut educational field, that ordinarily requires higher education at least through the bachelor's level, and offers a lifetime career to its members" (Mosher, 1982, pp. 115-16)). In addition, he classifies professions as "general professions," which are fields employed by the public and the private sectors generally (such as law, medicine, engineering); and the "public service professions," which are fields employed by the public sector generally (Mosher, 1982). Therefore, the term "professional" here is used to describe a class of educated individuals, possessing specialized skills, in a clearly defined field, regulated, and accredited in some way, by professional associations and/or educational agencies.

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

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

Webbased journalism is a fastpaced environment, which means journalists are constantly under pressure to complete their new stories

in order to remain competitive. The quest for objectivity is the main loser of this development.

According to Stuart (2004), Journalism faces an erosion of identity resulting from various factors, including the use of technology to mediate services, and lack of faith in government institutions generally. The new technological advance has given birth to online journalism which is hard to employ and control ethics, mode of training and corruption among media houses. Focusing upon journalism, the erosion of status may be seen through the dimensions of informational asymmetry (different media houses report the same event differently) and perception of professional value (quality, factual, ethical and sensible reporting, observing ethics (Bowman, 2000). Professional institutions are weakening since, in a number of respects, they sometimes fail to embrace qualified journalists in commercial media channels. Irrespective of how the effects on content quality are perceived, influential commercial demands do have negative effects on the altruistic features that are typical of a professional ideology (Nygren, 2008).

This shows that the profession of journalism is currently under threat and thus a need to explore the professional autonomy of the Kenyan journalists.

### **Materials and Methods**

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

### **Findings and discussions**

#### **Exploring Professional Autonomy from Different Perspectives**

The independence of journalists may take various connotations depending on the cultural context and dimension of news practice in different settings. In this study, the perceptions of respondents regarding autonomy were depicted in three different aspects.

The first one is the ideal of objectivity which in itself represents a range of values such as truth, relevance, balance, and neutrality (Westerstahl, 1972). This ideal is also associated with democratic tenets such as equality and justice and prescribes a non-partisan stand towards sources. Journalists should always accommodate divergent views in a news story in order to allow the audiences make their own deductions. McQuail (1991) posits that journalists can enhance the credibility of their content by observing these virtues and thereby helping media houses to keep distance with advertisers

The second ideal under this dimension is neutrality which in this case is used to refer to the actual dissemination of journalistic material. Journalists can present content to consumers in a participatory manner by synthesizing and trying to galvanize opinions towards a particular direction. Presenting information neutrally involves taking a passive stand and strictly observing the principle of objectivity as a guiding star (Johnson *et al.*, 1976). This approach is associated with early journalism where it was common for journalists to publish information written by politicians without altering a word. This observation was also common when Kenya was a one party state and Voice of Kenya which was the only broadcasting station used to receive news bulletin from Presidential Press Service which was supposed to be aired without alterations.

The last item concerning the issue of autonomy in this study is the mirroring ideal. This ideal is used to illustrate an alternative approach to the tenet of objectivity. It represents a situation where journalists must profess and always give priority to the truth even if reality in itself is partial. This ideal at a glance appears misplaced when compared to the first two ideals under the dimension of autonomy. However, the question in the survey instrument was worded "A journalist should consider himself as a mirror of public opinion". In this way therefore, it illustrates a journalistic stand towards popular opinions among the public in general rather than politicians specifically. The researcher regards this ideal as important and interprets it as a representation mirroring a journalistic conduct.

This study therefore utilized these three ideals to show how Kenyan journalists

perceive the question of autonomy from different angles as illustrated in table 1

**Table 1: Gender and professional autonomy**

	Gender	N	Mean
Someone who objectively mediates news	Male	188	4.0
	Female	114	4.1
Someone who reports events neutrally	Male	186	4.2
	Female	116	4.1
A mirror of public opinion	Male	184	4.3
	Female	117	4.1

Taking into account the number of journalists who subscribe to these statements it is clear from table 1 that the ideal of objectivity was the strongest. This stand was further reinforced by the fact that more than half of the media editors who were interviewed supported this ideal. The origin of objectivity as a journalistic value can be culturally traced to the British tradition. The British news culture in general is more traditional, class based, male dominated and hierarchical in nature. Kenya being a British colony for more than two decades borrowed and adopted this culture. It is the social affiliation or subcultures prevailing in a particular setting that determines the ideological and professional values that members will always adhere and cherish.

The neutrality ideal also indicates a relatively high level of support. One possible reason why this ideal is not as popular as the ideal of objectivity is possibly because it is viewed by journalists as conflicting ideal to the popular ideals of scrutiny and explanation. This is because when one is explaining something, it will require some level of interpretation and therefore it is difficult to be absolutely neutral. The relative strength can also be attributed to the contextual changes in the media scene in Kenya over the last decade. The liberalization of media market in Kenya opened doors for competition leading to commercialization

of news production. The politicization and control of news content by the state was also losing ground as a result of liberalization policy. These developments therefore meant journalists had to adopt a neutral style towards sources and factual matters as a way of survival. Respondents indicated the least support for mirroring ideal. The conception of this ideal today is considered too passive and many may not want to identify with as a news value.

According to Paulo a veteran journalist who has worked in various media houses in senior management positions for thirty five years, journalistic autonomy is facing challenges from standardized working procedures and controls from management who in turn work according to the dictates of the owners. George Nyabuga (2012) in his article entitled deconstructing media freedom and responsibility reinforced this view by remarking that;

Because most journalism is seen as private business, the owners seek to control content, or output. They often use their media houses to advance their own agendas, economic or political and even business interests (Nyabuga, 2012.p 5).

The support given to the ideal of neutrality in this study can be interpreted as an attempt by journalists to stamp their feet on the privilege of self-regulation. Increasing support for neutrality ideal in this case may be indicative of decreasing conditions of being neutral. The harder it gets to live out the ideal in reality, the more the journalists cling to it as a way of safeguarding their professional identity. This situation depicts some kind of struggle between management and journalists in an organization. Though such a conclusion appears pessimistic, it is in tandem with the theoretical frame of Bourdieu (Wiik, 2010) where values are used as a means in the ongoing struggle for legitimacy. Given this background, the support for the ideals of objectivity and neutrality in this study depicted a character of being defensive rather than being progressive.

### **Gender and Professional autonomy**

The support for the ideals of objectivity and neutrality in this study appears almost the same for both men and women journalists. However, the results indicate marginal differences in their opinions but when the element of education is introduced, variance begin to emerge. The ideal of neutrality is more pronounced among women journalists without professional qualifications.

The mirroring ideal also indicates interesting results especially when survey results are compared with the responses of veteran journalists. The survey

results does not seem to reveal any meaningful statistical difference but women veteran journalists especially those with formal journalistic qualifications showed greater support for this ideal.

Men and women seem to think alike on the ideal of objectivity irrespective of journalistic qualifications as indicated in table 2. More than half of the veteran journalists interviewed concerning objectivity supported the fact that this ideal has always been associated with men. This line of thinking portrayed by the veterans seems to crown the empirical standpoints as far this particular ideal.

**Table 2: Gender and professional autonomy**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Someone who objectively mediates news	Male	188	4.0
	Female	114	4.1
Someone who reports events neutrally	Male	186	4.2
	Female	116	4.1
A mirror of public opinion	Male	184	4.3
	Female	117	4.1

Research indicates that the ideal of neutrality was more popular among men while women applied a more participating approach based on audience orientation and interpretation (Wiik, 2007; Melin-Higgins, 1996). This is not however reflected in this study since the two genders exhibited the same behavior.

### **Education and professional autonomy**

Ottosen (2004) and Schultz (2007) argue that cultural capital in relation to education may not be of much importance in the field of journalism as compared with “professional capital” in the form of duration of service as a journalist. However, the level of education may actually demonstrate various attitudes on the professional identity and ideals. Training in journalism is considered a gateway to the profession and at the same time taken as an avenue of establishing and legitimating professional autonomy (Hulthen, 2001). The results as indicated in table 3 do not show marked differences among journalists

possessing the different types of capital. Majority of the veteran journalists who participated in this study did not hold any journalistic degrees and yet they showed greater support for the three ideals.

**Table 3: Professional autonomy and journalism qualification**

	Qualification in Journalism	N	Percentage
Someone who objectively mediates news	with qualifications	266	88%
	without journalism qualification	36	12%
Someone who reports events neutrally	with qualifications	266	88%
	without journalism qualification	36	12%
A mirror of public opinion	with qualifications	265	87%
	without journalism qualification	36	13%

Another remarkable observation from the study is that majority of journalists with journalistic qualifications agreed with the ideal of neutrality and it was even more pronounced among those below the age of thirty years.

These outcomes therefore endorsed the fact that differences in attitudes regarding this dimension of ideals is as a result of qualifications in journalism. This position was further augmented by the variations in responses from journalists belonging to different generations.

The objectivity ideal for example was strongly supported by the oldest journalists especially those who did not have any professional qualifications in journalism. A difference in understanding among journalists as they responded to the survey questions pointed to the fact that perhaps objectivity and neutrality denoted different meanings from what it was some years ago.

The results further indicated that the new and the old generation journalists did not give a lot of weight to the mirroring ideal except for few journalists who had no professional qualifications.

**Table 4: Support for the neutrality ideal in control for age and formal qualifications**

	Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Total
<b>With Journalistic qualification</b>						
30 and younger years	.0%	4.1%	19.9%	20.5%	55.5%	100.0%
31-40 years	2.4%	3.6%	14.5%	24.1%	55.4%	100.0%
41-50 years	.0%	.0%	11.1%	51.9%	37.0%	100.0%
Above 50 years	.0%	12.5%	.0%	25.0%	62.5%	100.0%
<b>Without Journalistic qualification</b>						
30 and younger years	.0%	6.7%	33.3%	33.3%	26.7%	100.0%
31-40 years	.0%	8.3%	41.7%	25.0%	25.0%	100.0%
41-50 years	12.5%	.0%	12.5%	37.5%	37.5%	100.0%
Above 50 years	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Types of media houses and professional autonomy**

The results as indicated in table 5 shows that the objectivity and neutrality ideals were strongly supported more than other ideals by a number of journalists across various media houses. The ideal of objectivity was the strongest among journalists in the mainstream publications and weakest in those working in radio stations (60 percent in full agreement, compared to 44 percent). Those from other media types range in between. The mirroring ideal is the least supported from all media ho

**Table 5: Support for the ideals of objectivity, neutrality and mirroring in control for place of work**

	Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent
<b>Someone who objectively mediates news</b>					
Mainstream publications	4.1	5.2	14.4	33.0	43.3
Mainstream private broadcast	3.9	4.7	13.4	35.4	42.5
Mainstream public broadcast	1.0	4.9	21.6	42.2	30.4
Small FM stations	1.3	4.0	29.3	26.7	38.7
<b>Someone who reports events neutrally</b>					
Mainstream publications	2.1	4.1	16.5	22.7	54.6
Mainstream private broadcast	1.7	3.4	21.4	23.9	49.6
Mainstream public broadcast	2.6	7.9	18.4	28.9	42.1
Small FM stations	0.0	3.6	18.7	26.6	51.1
<b>A mirror of public</b>					

<b>opinion</b>						
Mainstream publications	0.0	3.0	15.2	29.3	52.5	
Mainstream private broadcast	0.0	2.6	16.2	30.8	50.4	
Mainstream public broadcast	5.4	5.4	16.2	32.4	40.5	
Small FM stations	3.6	1.4	14.3	32.1	48.6	

The results from the study as presented in table 5 further indicated that the ideal of neutrality was least supported by journalists from mainstream public broadcast as compared with the commercial media houses.

### **Area of coverage and professional autonomy**

This conjecture was established by considering the role played by journalists' area of coverage in their support for the ideals of objectivity, neutrality and mirroring.

**Table 6: Support for the ideals of objectivity, neutrality and mirroring in control for main area of coverage**

	Not at all	Low extent	Moderate extent	Great extent	Very great extent	Total
<b>Someone who objectively mediates news</b>						
Hard news	7	3	19	35	37	100
Soft news	0	5	21	33	41	100
General information	1	5	20	38	36	100
<b>Someone who reports events neutrally</b>						
Hard news	1	4	16	29	50	100
Soft news	0	4	19	23	55	100
General information	1	4	19	26	51	100
<b>A mirror of public opinion</b>						
Hard news	0	6	21	19	54	100
Soft news	2	1	12	33	51	100
General information	4	1	14	33	49	100

Table 6 indicates that journalist working in soft news areas supported the ideal of objectivity more than those working in other areas of news production. Also the ideals of neutrality and mirroring were the strongest among journalists

dealing with soft news.

According to Windahl (1975), the ideal of objectivity is perceived differently depending on the media houses and the different areas of news coverage.



There are those who hold the view that adhering to this ideal will help build public confidence. Journalists also use this ideal as a shield against any criticisms and to positively position themselves in the market environment. He is also of the view that objectivity serves to support the professionalism process of journalism since it propagates truth which is considered a common denominator in all professions (ibid.).

The relative support given to the ideals of objectivity and neutrality by journalists working in soft areas of news production can only be understood through an argument advocated by Windahl (ibid.). Ordinarily, one would have expected journalists from hard news areas to demonstrate a stronger support for the two ideals of objectivity and neutrality. Their support for autonomy is understood since they are sometimes criticized for running errands for entertainment industries. Another study carried out by Dellgran (2006) among commercial journalists also confirms same attitudes portrayed by soft news reporters. Since there are no distinct boundaries in the profession, those working in areas that are not considered as mainstream journalism such as sports and entertainment, are always fighting for recognition and legitimacy by stressing ideals that are associated with the profession.

## **Conclusion**

From the study findings, the ideals of objectivity and neutrality were popular in all groups of journalists while the mirroring ideal was decreasing in practically all groups. All these changes confirmed the fact that professional identity of Kenyan journalists has been influenced to a great extent by the general liberalization of society. The media system in Kenya just like others elsewhere has been deregulated and depoliticized since the 1980's. This development gave rise to a general trend of commercialization where the main focus been to produce media products that are driven by the needs of the market. In this case, readers, listeners and viewers are seen as consumers. In such a situation, media managers will have to ensure that media products that are manufactured by journalists on daily basis must be in line with the wishes of owners and advertisers (Herman & McChesney, 1997). This is to ensure that a favourable environment for selling media products is developed.

The rules of objectivity are used as a shield against the dictates of media owners and other interest groups who may be pursuing other agendas. The strong support given to the ideals of objectivity and neutrality in this study confirmed this line of thinking. Herman and McChesney further argue that the ideal of objectivity is a myth rather than a reality. According to the two scholars, the principle of objectivity is silent on pertinent issues of news production such as what stories to select or what slant to take in a story. It is a mechanism of social control that legitimizes the authority and autonomy of journalism as a profession, simultaneously hiding the commercial interests it relies on (Schudson, 1978).

Kenyan media have traditionally enjoyed some reasonable press freedom since independence. This has enabled journalists to develop and observe a code of conduct for purposes of self-regulation and to safeguard high journalistic standards. The advent of multi-party politics and liberalization in the 1990's provided more room for freedom and independence especially from the political class. This situation provided media entrepreneurs' rich opportunities to develop and perpetuate their own ideological, philosophical, social and political orientations of their own media houses. The support for the ideals of objectivity and neutrality in this study signalled a move by journalists to exercise independence in their work and to protect themselves against influences that may compromise their professionalism.

The increasing independence of the media from political influence is described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as one of the main characteristics of the liberal model. The model provides an avenue where the media acts on its own logic by synchronously merging professional and commercial interests. The two ideas act in coherence with each other and the blending differ from one media house to another. Evetts (2005) explains this relationship by describing it as the “management of professionalism”.

Also implied in the model is the American, active approach of investigative journalism. The strong support given to the ideal of scrutiny in this study was linked to investigative journalism which is an emerging field and fundamental to the professional identity of Kenyan journalists. It demands higher level of education and professionalism.

The strong support for objectivity and neutrality also implied disclamation of out-dated ideals such as mirroring. The meaning of this ideal has probably changed given the changes in the society including the high level of education and training in the media industry. While it was used to portray reality as it was, it suggested lack of scrutiny and criticism. The interpretation of change in meaning of this ideal can also be explained through social constructivist theory. It was relevant for journalist before 1960's to package and disseminate information in a way that reflected the realities in the society. This perspective has changed because journalists are more engaged in producing constructions of reality and that objectivity is more an aim to strive for than an actual condition.

The results of this study therefore confirm the context given by Hallin and Mancini (2004). The tendencies of autonomy related ideals of objectivity, neutrality and mirroring confirm that the assumed influence of the liberal model was strongly experienced in the media market in Kenya.

## **Recommendation**

The study recommends that the journalists and the media institutions in order to contribute actively to economic and social development, should write and disseminate objective, balanced and fair content. The study has shown that, there is a positive correlation between audiences' level of trust for content and level of objectivity. Journalists coming from mainstream media houses are always conscious about their credibility and therefore they enjoy a high level of confidence from audience as compared with those from small media houses.

Journalism training curriculum should be reviewed to be in tandem with the ever changing needs of the discipline. For purposes of standardization, the curriculum for middle level colleges should be administered by Kenya Institute of Education and examined by Kenya National Examination Council. Among the factors to be considered in the curriculum are age, maturity and academic background of the students pursuing journalism or communication courses, as well as their level of proficiency in the receptive and expressive language skills.

The study recommends that the definition of a journalist, as stated in the Media Act 2007, should be amended to give clear distinction on who should be regarded as a professional journalist. The bare minimum in terms of academic qualifications should be degree in a relevant course in mass media from a recognised institution. The Council should take up the responsibility of providing accreditation of media training institutions in addition to providing the same to media practitioners.

Journalists should feel free from undue interference in the conduct of their duties by negotiating agreements with their media owners which will guarantee editorial independence and reduce the influence of political and commercial interests

Media managers should ensure that journalists are protected from undue external influence and inducement from other sources by offering them just and fair remuneration and conducive working environments.

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