

# ICT Trends and Their Role in Shaping the Media Industry in Kenya

by  
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## 1. Introduction

“Three thousand years from now, when keen minds review the past, ...our ancient time here at the cusp of the Third Millennium, will be seen as the start of a major new historical epoch. In the years roughly coincidental to (the first major ICT-related IPOs), humans began animating inert objects with tiny slivers of intelligence, connecting them into a global field, and linking their own minds into a single thing. This will be recognised as the largest, most complex and most surprising event on the planet. Weaving nerves out of glass and radio waves, our species began wiring up all regions, all processes, all facts and notions into a grand network. From this embryonic neutral net was born a collaborative (media) interface for our civilisation.”<sup>2</sup>

What is described here is part of a continuing narrative that begun many years ago – definitively in 1895 when Guglielmo Marconi first experimented with radio signals opening up our world to what became known as wireless technology, which has since then set the pace for media development worldwide, including Kenya.

Then, wireless technology could only transmit sound (voice). Today, more than a century later, not only has wireless technology advanced enough to transmit text, it transmits pictures – motion and static – as well in various formats and dimensions in real time. What has made this revolution – one that has not spared even the poor Third World – possible is commonly referred to as *convergence*.

In his enlightening book *The World is Flat*, Thomas L. Friedman captures this phenomenon thus:

The flat world platform is the product of the convergence of the personal computer (which allowed every individual suddenly to become the author of his or her own content in digital form)

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<sup>2</sup> Kelly, Kevin, *Wired*, August 2005 issue.

with fibre optic cable (which suddenly allowed all those individuals to access more and more digital content around the world for next to nothing) with the rise of work flow software (which enabled individuals all over the world to collaborate on that same digital content from anywhere, regardless of the distances between them.)<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Living the future

Hand-in-hand with convergence, has been the multiplicity of media. While the former gave consumers of media the power to decide, the latter gave them the power to share. Thus, raising mobiles aloft, they did not just talk and text, they snapped, shared and reported the world around them.<sup>4</sup>

Not only has this demystified the media, it has made the media more responsive to customer demands. Thus, for example, in Kenya, both *Standard* and *Nation* have a “breaking news” short message service (sms) to those who subscribe to it. And these subscribers forward such breaking news items to their circles of friends without the media house’s permission.

These developments have also enabled consumers to be part of the news gathering process. They call television (TV) and radio stations to report from the field or correct erroneous information; they create and watch their own programmes at home; they browse the web for just what they want and share it among their own networks and so on.

It is no wonder then, that media houses around the world, including our own, are beginning to spare some of their best journalists for new media such as websites and SMS direct services. Initially, this was not necessarily the case. Online journalists were dispensable before. Not any more.

On radio and TV especially, I am sure you are aware of live programmes. Phoning into programmes to make contributions have become the order of the day with some regular contributors being nicknamed ‘Serial Callers’. The multiplicity of FM stations, especially, has led to better coverage of events with some stations running live outside broadcasting of some events.

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<sup>3</sup> Friedman L.T, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, 2006, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, USA.

<sup>4</sup> BBC NEWS: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/technology/4566712.stm>  
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All these would not be possible without ICT developments. What's more, the revolution continues: The mass consumer has at his or her disposal many more gadgets with greater capacity to record, store and share content. They are increasingly challenging those who have traditionally provided them with content – be it news, music, or movies. In short: Us the media. And make no mistake – even Third World countries like Kenya are feeling this revolution.

Generally, circulation figures have not been going up for many 'proud' newspapers and magazines. Consumers are increasingly doing it on their own. But a few innovative and responsive papers are registering growth – both on and offline. Purely for reasons of modesty, I'll not say where the paper for which I work falls.

Around the world, as a recent report by London's *Economist* revealed, ICT trends are making the newspaper business difficult. It says:

Of all the "old" media, newspapers have the most to lose from the Internet. Circulation has been falling in America, western Europe, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand for decades (elsewhere, sales are rising). But in the past few years the web has hastened the decline. In his book *The Vanishing Newspaper*, Philip Meyer calculates that the first quarter of 2043 will be the moment when newsprint dies in America as the last exhausted reader tosses aside the last crumbled edition.<sup>5</sup>

The same is happening to advertising revenues. They are also shifting online. In the west in the last ten years, newspaper advertising revenues have dropped by six (6) percentage points while it is increasing on the Internet. People generally spend less time on the newspaper than before and newspapers are employing ever fewer people.<sup>6</sup>

Why is this happening? Because ICT has changed and continues to change the way people access and use information and entertainment content.

In Africa, the *African Executive* – a weekly online magazine covering only issues relevant to Africa and development with a subscriber base of 21,000 readers and

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<sup>5</sup> The Economist Newspaper Ltd, *The Economist: Who Killed The Newspaper?*, Volume 380 Number 8492, September 2006, London, UK.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

250,000 hits a month – is a good example of how online journalism is taking on traditional print journalism.<sup>7</sup>

The *African Executive* argues that mainstream African papers have been starving readers of the in-depth useful information Africa needs to grow. Up to mid-last year, the *African Executive* had 3,000 subscribers, a number that shot up late last year. And there are many more ‘specialised’ websites focussing on issues their owners and subscribers feel newspapers are giving short thrift.

The lesson here is simple: Techno-tools are not dumb funnels for the same paid-for content from mainstream media; they are powerful tools for socio-political expression and reportage. The consumer is turning into the citizen with a meaningful role to play.

Today, amateur cameras capture events before any media camera can. It has also become the celebrities’ nightmare for they cannot make a step without risking being captured on camera.

Think about it: Would the so-called Githongo tapes been possible without ICT? Would they have reached London before Kenyans are aware of them without ICT? With ICT everybody is the best investigative journalist they can be.

But even as everyone is trying to render me jobless by becoming a journalist, almost every company – riding on the crest of ICT trends – is trying to become a media company. They have websites that rival ours, often carrying beyond the usual company news and information; they poach the best journalists in the market to run their information outfits; they sponsor news segments on prime TV and some – like Barclays Bank Ltd – actually do have great programmes produced by their own staff.

As the BBC once put it: “The changing nature of news offers a diversity of voices, sources, and choice... and lets anyone join in global and local conversations.”

In Kenya, as in the rest of the world, this has put a demand on the part of the media to ensure their audiences have access to quality and trusted sources of news and information – and this is a good thing.

New media and connectivity are therefore definitely shaping the production and distribution of media and the nature of communication in our society. The most important point to note here is that every society, with its own needs and norms,

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<sup>7</sup> [www.africanexecutive.com](http://www.africanexecutive.com)

resolves the tension between availability and use of communication technology differently.<sup>8</sup>

Since media is business and has to survive and possibly thrive, what do media companies have to do to survive the twin demands of convergence and multiplicity of media devices?

The answer lies in *The New Market Leaders* by Fred Wiersema:

(They should) give much greater weight to the one success factor absolutely critical in the New Economy: An organisation's ability to attract valuable customers both now and in future. This is vital because today's most serious business challenge doesn't involve implementing new management techniques, raising capital, or any of the familiar bugaboos of recent decades (all has been done – TQM, restructuring, benchmarking, mergers and so on). Today's most serious business challenge is a scarcity of customers.

As we have seen, the media is not spared this scarcity. Indeed, what Wiersema is recommending for businesses here, is something the media had already graduated into in order to survive: Living in the future. In Kenya, we are even miles ahead. That is why we have already reported on the 2007 General Election before it is even announced. We cannot give you yesterday's news because radio, TV and mobile phones have beaten us to it. And those who might be tempted to think we are sensationalising things had better wake up to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a century ruled by ICT, a century beginning in which only two types of newspapers will survive: the highbrow and the entertainingly populist. Everything in between will go.<sup>9</sup>

The best example of living in the future is the BBC's recent announcement of details of the anticipated reorganization designed to make the "Creative Future" content strategy a reality. The mission is to concentrate on emerging technologies, playing a leading role in finding and developing new ways for audiences to find and use content.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> LaRosa C.R, *Shaping Media: Evolution through Communication Technology*, Hamilton College, Hamilton, USA.

<sup>9</sup> The Economist Newspaper Ltd, *The Economist: Who Killed The Newspaper?*, Volume 380 Number 8492, September 2006, London, UK.

<sup>10</sup> [www.paidcontent.org/more-on-bbc-restructuring-new-future-media-and-technology-division](http://www.paidcontent.org/more-on-bbc-restructuring-new-future-media-and-technology-division)

### 3. Diversifying to Survive

But there is something more radical than living in the future that is happening to media companies due to ICT trends: This is spawning entirely new businesses unrelated to the gathering, processing and dissemination at a fee of information and entertainment content.

So media houses are launching profitable new ventures that are only indirectly related to journalism. Schibsted (a Norwegian newspaper firm), for instance, started an online slimming club... The Online Daily Telegraph of Britain sells readers everything from goose-down pillows to Valentine's Day topiary baskets to insurance.<sup>11</sup>

And hence in Kenya you have *Standard* and *Nation* collaborating with supermarkets to send Kenyans in the Diaspora Tusker beer packs and Unga during Christmas, as well as receive and pass on to their relatives here at home messages of goodwill – something hitherto reserved for the postal corporation. I am sure many of you also know that *Nation* – a media company – transports parcels – the domain of a courier company.

So powerful is the influence of ICT on the media in Kenya today, that the phenomenon of mobile workers has been accepted as the norm. Media houses are trying to make their journalism more local. Thus, media houses have invested in mobile journalists (“mojos” in the West although the term has not caught on here) with wireless laptops who almost permanently work outside the office.

That is how come you can see that clip of a 5.00pm bar brawl from Mombasa during your 7.00pm news. That is how come you view the Orange or Banana rally in remote villages soon after they happen. That is how come you will read a paper in Kisumu in the morning as you board a bus to Nairobi, but when you get here you see the same day's edition looking different – carrying news for a completely different audience.

These days, newspapers actually do cover parliament, sports, field events etc in real time. As soon as the story is done, at the click of a button it is in the newsroom for processing and the “mojo” is to other things.

Globally, the successful media companies are those that have embraced ICT and are using it for business. That is why Google – a search engine – is the leading media house in terms of news content aggregation. That is why, *Standard* online

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is the leading news site in this region<sup>12</sup> – we use simple, friendly yet advanced tools that make our website easy to load and navigate.

Other results of ICT trends is greater, often strange, collaboration among media houses. For example, during the World Cup, you will remember the necessary collaboration between Kenya Television Network (KTN) – a private broadcaster – and Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), a public broadcaster to beam the live matches to millions of homes in Kenya. The same happened during the so-called “Great Debates” in October and November last year.

#### **4. Technology shaping media today**

Due to time and space constraints, one cannot exhaust an exposition on this matter. Allow me, therefore, to briefly outline technology that is shaping the media today, mostly in the west, but inevitably, though to a less extent here.

Internet Pay TV (IPTV). Still being refined, it will play a key role in re-shaping the TV experiences for end users with interactivity, multiple digital streams and High Definition TV becoming the household standard during this decade. IPTV will especially offer increased control of what is being watched, when, by whom and how much. This is particularly important for parents who want to protect their children from violence and other inappropriate content and would like to control how much money they spend on an individual basis. Personal profiles also entails that individuals can receive information and advertisements only relevant to them. Three hoorays for technology!

Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL). This technology allows you to use the whole bandwidth of a standard telephone copper cabling to receive TV and other content. The last mile capacity bottlenecks are solved with the introduction of ADSL to support multiple simultaneous TV streams.

Digital TV: The introduction of digital television has caused significant increase in the number of channels operating. It allows for maximised clear coverage. That is why KTN and NTV are now almost national broadcasters with clear signals reaching far corners of the country.

Other ICT technologies that continue to impact the media are mobile TV, mobile radio, blogs, and video streaming – which will be very helpful in next year’s election.

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<sup>12</sup> Alexa.com, google.com and yahoo.com

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, ICT and media trends around the world, and in Kenya too, predominantly focus on commerce and technology. The question for us is: Is that how it should be for a country like ours besieged as it is by myriad socio-political problems? In my opinion, in Africa ICT and media trends should focus more on the social and economic impact of the development of appropriate technology, the dissemination of information and the rapid deployment and penetration of communication systems for better access to information. Here, I am talking about harnessing ICT and media to make ours a people-centred and inclusive information society. This, in my view, should be the future of ICT and media in Kenya. And this lies squarely in the domain of national policy.

Thanks to all of you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you.

## References

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