

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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SOCIAL MEDIA, BLOGGING AND CITIZEN JOURNALISM: RECONFIGURING ETHICAL STANDARDS.



A Keynote Address by Rachael Akidi at the 2017 Social Media Conference

I left Uganda 15 years ago to join the BBC World Service in London. When I started, the organization was going through what was described as revolutionary change. It was phasing out broadcast technology that had been used since the 1960s and was introducing computer editing software. Many of us thought at the time that THAT was as modern as broadcasting could get. Those were the days when a story would

break in a remote part of Africa and we'd sometimes get to hear about it 24 hours later. Sometimes you would spend nearly 24 hours trying to verify a story that you're hearing may have happened in Kismayo or Kitgum. And there would be excitement in the newsroom when you finally found that man or woman on a crackly telephone and this would almost certainly be some local government, church or NGO official with access to a phone. I was a radio journalist and broadcaster. And that was it.

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I went to work and produced programmes for the radio. I'm not sure I personally would have predicted that my role would rapidly evolve in just a few years to telling stories beyond the radio, on Platforms that didn't even exist just over a decade ago. The media was radio, television online and the press- the newspapers. I'm also not sure many traditional media journalists would have imagined competing for audiences with the likes of twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Who knew 10 years ago, that people would be walking around with a whole world of news and information in their back pockets? Or even handbags? These tech giants along with the mobile have completely disrupted the Media industry. Not only have business models have been disrupted. The way we communicate and distribute content has also significantly changed.

Our information consumption habits are now more complex than ever. This has forced media houses to adapt their news cycles to suit the changing behavior of the audiences. I work on a programme called Focus on Africa. When I started, it was a very dominant programme across Africa. Every time it came on air – people stopped to listen. People made an appointment with the programme at 6pm East African time. Today's young audiences are mainly mobile. They are not going to sit down at an appointed time to get news on the radio or television. They'd rather get it on

the go. They want to get it on demand - at a time when it suits them. For many of this restless millennial generation, social media is their news platform. It's the first thing they check when they wake up and the last thing they check before going to bed at night. And I'm sure this is increasingly the case for many of us. So this is actually a Positive. It's an opportunity for traditional media to reach a demographic that has for generations been elusive.

In democratizing the media, the new platforms have given rise to a new movement. I call them a new movement of story tellers. You could argue it has also lowered the entry barrier into journalism; because today anyone – and I mean any one - with a basic smart phone and internet MBs can become a "JOURNALIST". I'm not talking about the reporter or writer, who trains or practices journalism professionally, but the citizen journalist; the once upon a time -audience member- who decides to perform the same function as a journalist. User generated content as we call it, is now an essential news gathering tool in many newsrooms around the world. I'll give an example of the recent tragic incidents in the U.K. The London fire and the terrorist attacks in both Manchester and London; most of the footage of the immediate aftermath that was used across various global TV networks was video taken by citizen journalists. This means that ordinary people are now able to

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. create content that influences global agendas....in a way that was not possible before.

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We've seen the emergence of new professions that did not exist just ten years ago. You have the social media producers and editors; and you have bloggers. Blogging has also become a full time profession. Some bloggers have built mini media empires, influencing policy in their localities. They've built their own audiences who follow them religiously..... and also have their own networks of other 'citizen journalists' or members of the public who tip them off and feed them with content. Some go as far as investigating major stories. Information can now travel across the world within seconds. So hearing about what has happened in Kismayo or Kapchorwa is a lot easier now.

INNOVATION

Another positive thing that the revolution has sparked off is innovation in the media. You do not only have to change but keep striving to remain ahead or risk becoming irrelevant. Staying ahead does not just involve getting content onto these platforms, but also keeping up with technology; Keeping up with the trends in the industry. Having an idea of where the next disruption is likely come from. For example, just as we are getting around figuring out how to use social media in news, and all the ethical challenges it presents to us, we are told we should be preparing for the fourth industrial revolution- Artificial in-

telligence. How is AI going to affect media ethics? Is it possible for the media to use AI and also preserve journalistic ethics? So it's an exciting time for the media. And it is an exciting time to be a journalist. But it is also a challenging time for the media; because these opportunities are also coming at a cost to long established ethical principles.

Traditional media has always prided itself in certain key values. When I started out as a journalist here in Uganda, I was constantly reminded about ethical issues such as accuracy and impartiality. As journalists, we have to ensure stories are verified before publication. We try to balance the story by hearing different sides or at least give people accused of anything- a right of reply. As Professional journalists, we are aware of issues to do with conflict of interest. I don't know whether it's still the case here, but where I practice; you'd have to declare any conflict of interest when doing certain stories and might even have to hand over the story to another colleague if necessary. We all know that media freedom also comes with huge responsibility. A responsibility to be fair, truthful and accurate. These are cherished ethical values which unfortunately do not seem to apply to these new story tellers. Can anybody tell me who citizen journalists are accountable to?

I've come across stories - some of them very defamatory published by some bloggers, without

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any attempt at getting a right of reply from the accused. I've seen whole reputations of not just individuals, but also companies damaged on these blogs. What happened to fairness? I think we've all read opinion that has been passed off as fact- by some bloggers. We've all seen very graphic pictures of either dead or wounded people being shared across these platforms, without any regard for their families. An example that comes to mind is that of the late police spokesman Felix Kaweesi. I'm sure many of you saw the graphic images of the immediate aftermath of his killing. What happened to privacy, respect and decency? What happened to humanity?

Don't these new story tellers have a duty to filter this content? Has social media desensitized us that we no longer get shocked at such pictures and those people's families feelings do not really matter? I want to show you this photograph which I believe many of you may have seen and perhaps even shared. It was taken by my friend Anne Gidudu a couple of years ago. She was travelling in Apac district when she came across this woman. She took the picture and sent it to me. I shared it (Crediting the photographer) on my social media pages and it kind of went viral. I've since seen it being used on various platforms, and by various publications, without any credit. Every time I see it, I wonder how much money Anne would have made, if she was able to enforce her copyrights in all

those instances. In other words, copyright laws are being violated with impunity on a daily basis on social media.

I will paraphrase the words of Sir Charles Dunstone the founder of Carphone warehouse who said: "The MEDIA WORLD used to look like Zurich but it increasingly resembles Mumbai. In our Ugandan context, we could say the media landscape used to look like Kabale, but now it looks like downtown Kampala, with thousands of boda bodas hooting and jostling for space. It's very crowded. There is so much noise. Every publisher in this space wants their voice to be heard. And to be heard first! And because social media success is assessed by engagement, more people are likely to click and share a story that is extraordinary. So stories are nowadays engineered by journalists to go viral. This has given birth to a new model of online journalism. We've seen the emergence of the likes of buzz feed, vice, upworthy, vox, Chimp reports here in Uganda. All great news startups. But I have to add - that- this desire to trend or go viral has also provided fuel for sensationalism.

AND Not only that- It has also created a fertile environment for fake news vendors to flourish. I've seen entire fake stories published by not just the websites out to make money, but by some reputable media houses. An example is the story about 'Eritrea's government ordering all men to

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marry more than one wife". This story went viral for several weeks; despite the repeated denials by the authorities in Eritrea. I hear some men started searching the internet to find out how to get visas to Eritrea. Many people believed the story because it originated from a credible newspaper—even if it was false. I'm sure we've all received those WhatsApp messages with so-called Breaking news announcing the "death of Zimbabwe's president or Nigeria's president Buhari. Even the great Nelson Mandela was "killed" dozens of times of twitter, before he eventually died. What happened to the principles of truth and accuracy AND verifying stories before publication?

And I don't like using the word gullible. But we the audience don't appear to be critical. We don't seem to interrogate this information. Even if they appear to be mock-ups websites of existing media houses, Just a short glance at the URL of some of these stories will tell you it is not a genuine news website. So why do we keep sharing it? Sharing it actually encourages it. Now what is even more disturbing is that some are using fake news to discredit journalism. And just to make it clear Fake news is not a story you disagree with or a story you don't like. Fake news is false news. Period.

INTEGRITY AND INDEPENDENCE

One of the key values we hold is independence. We've seen rows about bloggers being compromised around the continent. Some with political or financial allegiances that are not declared. Not just here in Uganda, but also in countries such as Kenya and South Africa. Some allegedly paid to tweet or sometimes fight proxy wars on social media --- undermining the principles of editorial integrity and independence. Now most of us use social media in our personal capacities. Have we asked ourselves who is responsible for what we say on our accounts? I'm sure most you can appreciate that it is increasingly difficult for our followers to disassociate our personal posts from our employers.

Even when we put disclaimers on our personal accounts, it is almost inevitable that if you expressed a personal opinion, it will be associated with the employer. I remember a story about three years ago -of an American woman who tweeted something controversial just as she got on a flight to South Africa.

Unfortunately for her, her tweet was perceived to be racist. By the time she landed in Cape Town, she had already been fired, because her tweet had caused a storm and brought her organization under enormous scrutiny. This places enormous responsibility on our shoulders as social media users, and any recklessness

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on our part can be very costly. NOW Where does this all this leave us? Are we better informed with all the unlimited access to information we have? My view is that despite having access to a whole world of information we may not necessarily be better informed.

Because first of all, this democratization of information has also led to information divide. You have millions or the 60% who are not yet connected to the internet..... So there is a huge information divide. Secondly; even if there is more information, data, news, freedom of expression, it has become even more difficult to distinguish between what is fact or fiction. So if we cannot distinguish between fact and fiction, can we legitimately claim to be better informed? Because we are bombarded with so much information, research has shown that a big number of us actually just skim through as opposed to reading. We know with video, people hardly watch videos to the end.

In adapting to the trends, several media houses have been forced to personalize content for their audiences. And while you still have traditional gate keepers or editors determining what gets published or broadcast, there is another editor that has emerged. The invisible or automated editor. This is the algorithm that determines who sees this content on social media. Algorithms are now used by several social media giants and online publications. Facebook has

been in the spotlight recently for their newsfeed algorithm.

They decide what you like and tailor or personalize your newsfeed for you. This effectively forces us to follow people who THEY think share the same world view with us. In other words, we are confined to information that the algorithms believe we are interested in.....creating the so-called filter bubble or echo chamber effect. The result is that we are no longer getting the broad picture of events. We are no longer getting opposing views. VIEWS that both challenge and enrich us.

Some argue that this effect was exposed during both the US elections and the Brexit referendum in the U.K. But I have to add that - there are calls for these tech companies to be more transparent in how they determine the algorithms. The argument is that Traditional media editors operate and make decisions guided by a code of ethics. What about these invisible algorithmic editors? What guidelines are they following?

PRINCIPLES/ CONCLUSION

NOW

Let me conclude by returning to the principles that underpin journalism.

We have to remember that these principles were developed more than a century ago. That was a time when the media was the press, the print media. Today the media has been redefined by technology and the media is many

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things; it is NBS and UBC. Its Capital Radio and KFM. It's the Daily Monitor and Chimp reports. And it's even Kakensa's Facebook page! This means we are presented with situations and moral dilemmas some of which we've never experienced before. Now from this range of media houses that I just mentioned, it's clear there will be a section that will continue to uphold these ethical values. But I also think it would be fallacious FOR US to expect all of them to adhere to the same principles. I've always wondered whether the media is clinging on to ethics and practices that are becoming obsolete?!?!?

Some scholars including Charles Ess, a scholar at the university of Oslo who has researched and written extensively on ethics in the digital world - suggest that because the impact of the technology revolution so huge.....we may require a new parallel set of digital media ethics. From my research, there are a number of guidelines that have been developed by different organizations, but there doesn't seem to be a consensus on the issue.

At the BBC, we agree we cannot edit the internet, BUT we can do our bit in the midst of all the noise, to inform the public. And we'll do this...By first of all sticking to our key values-- that includes providing accurate, independent and impartial information to our audiences. And we are also placing an emphasis on a concept called slow news. In other

words, we shall not abandon context and depth and analysis.

We will explain why certain stories matter and what they mean to our audiences? The 'reality check' service that helps fact check stories on Facebook, Instagram and others has now become a permanent service. So wherever we see a story deliberately misleading the public, the website will say so. It was used successfully during the elections.

And guess what? I think it's also important to note that despite the democratization of the media, and all the noise in this digital space, people still revert to traditional media to confirm or debunk what they have read online. So while the jury considers who is responsible for behavior in the digital world, I think It's journalism- and I mean original, truth-seeking, accurate and quality journalism that will continue to separate the news from the noise in this very crowded media landscape.