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(Re)imagining alternatives: The place and role of alternative media in Kenya

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Abstract

This article contends that the increasing commercialisation of the media has sometimes forced people to seek alternative spaces or platforms through which they can access and share information and articulate their issues. Alternative media thus offers people the alternative spaces and platforms they need to articulate and mainstream their issues. Thus the interest in alternative media is premised on the belief that they offer opportunities that better serve the interests and issues of the marginalised, the obscure, and the lowly. This is based on arguments that alternative media are not beholden to commercial and other interests that inhibit mainstreaming issues of great public interest and concern. Granted, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the mainstream and the alternative both in meaning and application especially when the issues of the elite and the “marginalised” interface in a media environment seeking to benefit from audiences irrespective of their position or status in society. Nonetheless, as this article argues, alternative media is seen as an agency democratising the media space in Kenya as audiences can play the dual role of producing and sharing or disseminating and mainstreaming content and issues of interest to the “common” people.

Key words: *alternative media, mainstream media, marginalisation, participation, agency*

Introduction

The increasing commercialisation of the media in Kenya has engendered serious debate about the place of the media in the country, and whether mainstream media serve genuine public interest and issues of the marginalised, the obscure, and the lowly. To help mitigate the challenges of access to and use of mainstream media, people now regularly turn to alternative media which they believe are not encumbered by corporate

ideals that drive popular but mainstream commercial media (cf. Atton, 2002). This is premised on the fact that commercial media mainly focus on “popular”, “appealing”, marketable and sellable content. Granted, the commercial popular media are replete with contradictions. Although they claim to serve truth and public interest, they offer few opportunities for the common people to participate in the production of their content (cf. Hamilton, 2000; McChesney, 1999) and mainstream issues that that matter to them. Indeed, as Hamilton (2000: 358) posits, the corporatised and technologised mass media systems prevent all but an extremely few people from meaningfully participating in the actual production of media. Accordingly, corporatism, and marginalisation can be said to have facilitated the rise of alternative media. As an agency oppositional to the status quo (cf. Hamilton, 2000) and the “power” and “influence” of mainstream media, alternative media is critical to mainstreaming issues of the marginalised, the disempowered and the lowly.

The above arguments notwithstanding and given the fact that alternative media require capital and technology to operate, there is sometimes little difference between the alternative and the mainstream. In other words there is hardly “strictly” alternative and “purely” mainstream media. Essentially, even though alternative media are somewhat different and “estranged” from the mainstream ‘... they are caught in the same dilemma ... they seek to become influential and powerful to help bring about changes to the current commercial media system and the society that supports it; yet, efforts to do so mean adopting the same large-scale, capital intensive, technologized means typical of mainstream media, which limits popular participation in alternative media just as much as in the mainstream, leaving them open to similar criticisms of exclusivity, narrowness, and worse’ (Hamilton, 2000: 358).

This paper is majorly concerned with examining the place and roles of alternative media in Kenya. It uses two main cases – the Reject and social media platforms – to illustrate the fact that alternative media is becoming key in the advancement of the issues of the marginalised as well as foiling the power of the ‘mainstream’ media. This article first attempts to define alternative media before giving it a Kenya context by examining the aforementioned two cases.

Contesting the ‘alternative’

Alternative media has been defined variously, and there is ambivalence on the criteria should used to determine the meanings given the fact that both commercial and alternative media exhibit and share the same characteristics. In effect, the definitional challenges and ambiguities raise numerous questions, among them: What exactly is alternative media? What makes alternative, alternative? Is it possible for commercial media offering ‘alternative’ content to be both mainstream and alternative? And to borrow from Fackson Banda’s (n.d) concern, ‘what are “alternative media” an *alternative* [italics in original] to?’ What is the interplay between the commercial mainstream and alternative media? Are there points of convergence between these two seemingly oppositional media? Is alternative media synonymous with ‘non-mainstream’? Where can we draw the line between the mainstream and the alternative? These are key questions that beg answers as debates on the meaning, role and place of alternative media rage.

Although alternative media share characteristics and formats as the mainstream (for example newspapers, radio, television, magazines, films and the Internet), their defining features are ‘decapitalisation – the circulation and distribution of alternative media products’; ‘deprofessionalisation – the do-it-yourself ethics/everyone’s a media producer now’; and ‘deinstitutionalization – the problems associated with organising a medium within collection organisations’ (Atton, 2002). In short, alternative media is anti-capitalistic, democratic or participatory and offers a broad audience ‘critical content’ either for free or at “affordable” rates (Atton, 2002: 7; Sandoval, 2009: 1-2). This explains Couldry’s (2003: 45) view that alternative media challenges the highly concentrated media system and the resulting symbolic power of capitalist mass media with a clear distinction between professional producers and ‘passive’ consumers.

As Atton (2002: 4) argues, alternative media offers ‘the means for democratic production to people who are normally excluded from media production. They are to do with organizing the media along lines that enable participation and reflexivity’. Essentially, whereas mainstream media exclude the non-professional, alternative media production is not only open to those who can but also those interested in using the media to advance issues of the ordinary and marginalised people often ignored by corporate media. Thus alternative media have also been considered key to mainstreaming ideologies, particularly those associated with marginalised communities. Although these arguments are highly contestable and even rebuttable, the range of alternative media platforms, their openness and uses evidence the claims. However, one thing is true. The ability to circumvent vested interests of the media owners, advertisers and other elite in society, and empower the marginalised (and “prosumers” – the producer-consumers) to mainstream their issues, supports arguments advanced to support theoretical and practical definitions of alternative media.

The alternative media’s power to foil mainstream media is derived from the fact that people have the capacity to appropriate both technologies and opportunities available to engage in media productions as producer-consumers. In so doing this, alternative media producers are able to circumvent commercial and/or mainstream media gatekeepers like advertisers, owners, and editors. In addition, the producers are able to resist the dominant elite issues, and hegemonic interests afflicting “corporatized” mass media. In other words, the producers now have the opportunity to resist the hegemony of the mainstream in their attempts to construct and mainstream ‘alternative’ issues and ideologies of the ‘marginalised’ and disempowered.

What’s more, alternative media is considered ‘an agent for social change, culture development and democratization’ (Servaes, 1999: 269) and as such ought to ‘create “information for action” timeously and rapidly’ (Atton, 2002: 12). Besides, they are seen as creating, and/or transforming the public sphere (cf. Habermas, 1989[1962]) by offering ‘new spaces for alternative voices that provide a focus both for specific community interests as well as for the contrary and the subversive’ (Silverstone, 1999: 103). In this sense then, they are inherently similar to the mainstream particularly in their roles as both seek to educate and mobilise (Allen, 1985; Altschull, 1995; Hamilton, 2000).

Nonetheless, given the above seemingly “romantic” definitions of alternative media (especially that it is anti-capitalistic or decorporatised, deinstitutionalised, and deprofessionalised), does it then mean that the mainstream commercial media do not represent the views of the marginalised and disempowered? Whereas it may be true that they give little space to the marginalised, and that they obsess with profitably and sellable content, mainstream media are also ideally interested in public interest issues. Although it may be that their interest is skewed in favour of that which sells, there is little doubt that they are keen on issues that also affect the marginalised or disempowered even if it is for selfish corporate or commercial purposes. For example, the issues of the victims of post-election violence, the internally displaced persons (or IDPs), and minorities (such as the gay and transgender) sometimes get space in the mainstream commercial media in Kenya. In short, whilst further research must be conducted to determine the extent and quality of whatever products are offered on minority issues, there is no doubt that such issues interest some audiences and find space, however modest, in the mainstream commercial media. It may also be that the issues are seen through the lenses of the ‘elite’, and that whatever the mainstream media contain are elite issues masked as public interest matters.

In essence, although there are differences between mainstream and alternative media, there are also points of convergence which demonstrate the fact that it is difficult to divorce the two. In fact, what we see is an ideal situation that cannot be purely alternative or indeed mainstream. Besides, this supports the notion that it may be impossible to develop a purely alternative media that fits into some straitjacket meaning given the fact that even the cohort of the prosumers may in fact possess professional skills and capital to engage in production and distribution of media.

Methodology

To determine the factors informing setup and operation as well as access and consumption of alternative media in Kenya, it is imperative that secondary arguments are supported by primary data. Consequently, this study employed various techniques to collect the primary information key to this task.

First, the study looked at products it considered 'alternative' among them *Reject* newspaper published by the Media Diversity Centre of the African Woman and Child Feature Service (popularly referred to as just AWC), and the Gay and Lesbians Coalition of Kenya (GALCK) website (<http://galck.org/>).

The research also conducted interviews with producers of some of these alternative products among them a respondent from GALCK who did not want to be identified, Jane Godia, the editor of *Reject*, and Martin Masai the secretary of Alternative Media Network (AMNET), an association bringing together owners and managers of FM and community broadcast media. The information collected informs the discussions below.

Reject the popular

Notwithstanding the definitional ambiguities above, *Reject* newspaper is perhaps the "epitome" of alternative media in Kenya. This conclusion is based largely on the content it publishes, and the issues it seeks to mainstream.

Briefly, *Reject* newspaper is published by the Media Diversity Centre (MDC), a project of African Woman and Child Feature Service. The project is funded mainly by Ford Foundation. Other organisations like Open Society Foundations, and Hivos also support the project. When it was started in 2009, it published every two weeks content that could not be carried (that which had been rejected) by the mainstream media. As the name suggests, the paper is interested in 'rescuing', cleaning, repurposing and publishing 'rejected' content. It is now published monthly online (see its website reject.awcfs.org for more details).

In most journalistic newsrooms in Kenya, stories are selected based on some criteria. Some of the most cited reasons for selection are relevancy, appeal (what is frequently referred as newsworthiness of the material) especially to consumers, recency and negativity (cf. Galtung and Ruge, 1965). But given the corporate nature of media in Kenya today, commercialism has become one of the key determinants of media productions although few, especially those running media owners, acknowledge that this influence operations and output. Essentially, journalism has become a commodity to be sold in what is now a crowded Kenyan media marketplace. In other words, media houses are business interested in the bottom-line and whatever is published is seen as products for sale. Consequently, it is difficult to publish material whose marketability is in doubt even in the publicly funded Kenya Broadcasting Corporation. For this reason, corporate media organisations undoubtedly pander to the popular, dumbing down as well as sensationalising issues in attempts to enhance their attraction or public appeal. In doing this, material without market appeal, despite relevance to the marginalised, are rejected.

Using an understanding of journalistic practices as the point of departure, the Media Diversity Centre then sought to find a platform for the rejected material. Since then, *Reject* has covered a series of issues the editors consider critical to society but which commercial media either ignore or "hide" in the "inside pages". Such "waste" is given life by *Reject* whose journalists and editors believe the mainstream media is biased against the issues of the marginalised and disempowered. As the editor of *Reject*, Ms Jane Godia explains, the content it publishes is often discarded by mainstream people because they consider it to be based on 'non-issues that do not warrant space. Sometimes they do not look at their stories given their warped view that whatever is published must be profitable. Such material is our staple food'.

However, a critical examination of *Reject* issues demands that we reconsider the definition of the alternative not only as a concept but also as part of understanding the operations of the alternative media. This is based on the view that whatever issues covered by *Reject* as an alternative platform, and the operational models the project favours, point to those associated with the commercial mainstream media.

Moreover, as the stories are mostly written, and edited by professional journalists, *Reject* does not really fall into the strict definitional parameters of alternative media. Instead, it seems to be a product of two worlds – both the mainstream and the alternative. This is based on the fact that although it picks and publishes what the editors say cannot be published by mainstream media, the content has to interest their own primary or target audience. Over time, *Reject* seems to have changed both its outlook and *modi operandi*. Initially, the focus was on the “rejected”. Over time, however, this has changed to the popular and mainstream, and issues that may generally fit into the mainstream commercial media now find space. Apart from salvaging the “rejected”, the paper now commissions its content, and publishes special issues based on what the editors think would interest their readers.

To demonstrate this shift, it is important to look at the current issue of *Reject's*. The platform seems to privilege health and “gender” stories. For example, the lead story is on gender based violence reproductive health. The story titled “Joyce Banda brings to the fore connection between gender based violence and reproductive health” deals with several issues relating to violence and attendant dangers women face. Although the article specifically deals with gender based violence, the fact that it is based on Malawi’s former president means it would have found space in any medium. However, it is relevant AWC and its audiences who expect the organisation and the publication to write on women and children issues. Nonetheless, the platform also reveals its bias towards issues relating to reproductive health, including teenage pregnancies, maternal healthcare, female genital mutilation, and environmental degradation.

However, a closer examination of a number of *Reject* content reveals that although the issues covered are sometimes ignored by the mainstream media, they cannot be strictly called “marginalised”. Instead, what we see are issues that the editors feel passionate about, specifically those relating to women and children, the philosophy that underpins AWC’s work. In essence, mainstreaming them is key to their own and AWC’s agenda and the audiences they serve.

What’s more, *Reject* was until 2016 an insert in the mainstream newspaper *The Star*, one of the mainstream newspapers in Kenya. By using *The Star* as a vehicle for distribution, it is clear their target was not strictly the marginalised but also those who read the mass circulating mainstream newspaper. This demonstrates the fact that the mainstream and the alternative do not have to be in competition. Rather, they can work together to further expand reach and ensure alternative issues are given prominence and mainstreamed. Besides, as Ms Godia explains, the mainstream media now regularly pick their stories for republication thus helping prioritise and mainstream what they may initially have considered unimportant.

In addition, the fact that *Reject's* stories are written and produced by professional journalists and editors means the claim that alternative media is deprofessionalised is somewhat repudiated. This conforms to observations that for maximum social impact, such media products have to adopt corporatised and technologised production approaches to widen reach and enhance impact (cf. Hamilton, 2000). Moreover, by using professional journalists, *Reject* goes against the operational definitional characteristics of alternative media. Granted, to maintain professionalism (and attendant values like accuracy, impartiality, and balance), they may convince readers and indeed the public that they are serious not only about offering ‘credible’ and ‘reliable’ material but that they are able to subscribe to and perhaps adhere to professional journalistic ethics and integrity.

The evidence and arguments above may then, as already suggested, mean there is urgent need to redefine alternative. The explanation offered by Ms Godia is that their “alternativeness” is based on their coverage of issues of the common people and not the elite. ‘The stories are those of the grassroots,’ says Ms Godia. ‘In most mainstream media they would go for politics, the big stories..... They would quote the elite, those in authority. Not for us. To us the strong stories are those about the common person, people in informal settlements, the disenfranchised, the poor. We try to avoid “elite” people.’

In addition, Ms Godia argues that by using *The Star's* distribution channels, they mainstreamed issues and reached more people for greater impact. However, the fact that *The Star* is driven by a strong profit motive (*Reject* had to pay for both printing and distribution) means the paper did not strictly adhere to strict alternative media modes of operation. First, *Reject* was seen as part of *The Star* even though copies were also available in MDC's content centres in what the editor describes as peripheral regions, and "neglected", "marginalised" and "inconsequential" places like Malindi, Narok, Mwingi, Garissa, Isiolo, Nanyuki, Migori, Busia, and Kitale. Secondly, *Reject* reached only a small number of people given the circulation of *The Star*. Thirdly, and perhaps more important, *Reject* was then seen as being part of *The Star* whose scope is seen as limited to issues of the elite.

Surprisingly, the editor says they do not shy away from being mainstream in as far as the issues are concerned. What she worries about is the over-obsession with the bottom-line. She argued that:

Issues that touch on common people not only enrich commercial media organisations but may also help inform policy. They help bring change and development in society. That way the media can boast of being responsible, that they care about the society in which they operate. That way the media may play their corporate and social responsibility role and trigger a bigger impact. If we are able to fight corruption in the issuance of ARVs [Antiretroviral drugs] ... if we manage behaviour change as a result of HIV/Aids education ... then it does not matter if we are mainstream. What we care about is mainstreaming the issues, not for monetary gain. When we mainstream issues we put issues at the forefront. And now ... it seems it's up to the alternative media to mainstream the issues.

As part of trying to redefine the alternative, and deductive from the foregoing arguments, it is imperative to look at the relationship between the mainstream and alternative as complementary and symbiotic. Corollary to the *Reject-The Star* relationship is the fact that it is difficult to see the operations of mainstream and alternative as exclusive. Moreover, as evident from the above arguments, the relationship helps both papers achieve greater social impact.

Mainstreaming the 'other'

In early May 2018, celebrated Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina Renowned announced that he planned to marry his long-time partner in a wedding set for early 2019 in South Africa.

He broke the news via social media where he added that they would be living in South Africa where his partner studies. In breaking the news, Wainaina wrote: 'We will get married there, early next year. We will have a reception for Kenyans in Nairobi sometime next year too. Nothing has surprised me more than coming to love this person, who is gentle and has the most gorgeous heart. I consider myself hugely lucky that he loves me and I have only recently fallen in love with him, but we have known each other and have been dating on and off since 2012.'

It should be noted that Wainaina was not only careful to break the news outside Kenya but also on social media which is a somewhat "safe" space for the articulation of views considered anathema in Kenya particularly amongst conservative Christians, traditionalists, homophobic, moralists and moral entrepreneurs who castigate homosexuality as unnatural and foreign. Widespread stereotypes about homosexuality in Kenya fuels prejudice and discrimination against gays and justify and reinforce preexisting antipathy towards sexual minorities and "deviance".

When he "confessed" his sexual orientation, Wainaina said that he was not 'afraid to talk. In fact, I am doing a documentary on it because this thing must be discussed. Kenyans should discuss it in all platforms but not before they hear the full story. I know you called me over this matter of coming out. I will talk but I don't want the media to manage my story'.

The statement that he did not want the media to “manage” his story was particularly telling about the state of mainstream media seen as part the establishment, and supportive of restrictive sexual ideology.

Another example of prejudice against homosexuality also illustrates the challenges facing sexual minorities, and its representation in mainstream media. The wedding in London of two openly gay Kenyan men Charles Ngenji and Daniel Chege Gichia in October 2009 saw bigoted opprobrium thrown at homosexuals, and the rise of homophobia in Kenya with some mainstream media openly condemning the couple and their families. While Kenyans sometimes seem tolerant of “otherness” and/or difference, sexual orientation and “deviance”, and particularly homosexuality, seems to evoke very strong emotions and sentiments from moralising individuals and institutions. Academics have long-argued that difference engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and mobilises fears and anxieties (cf. Hall, 1997). In this sense, Hall (1997: 238) holds that difference can be a ‘site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the “others”’. In their fascination with difference, and gayism in particular, some Kenyans seem revolted by the mere idea that people of the same sex can be attracted to each other, and that, consenting and rational individuals can engage in “legitimate” sexual activity.

Based on the above observations, the gay community feels threatened by society because of their sexuality and finding a platform through which they can express themselves freely and safely is vital to mainstreaming their issues and advancing societal understanding and acceptance. Thus the Internet has become a site where they can congregate and articulate their issues without fear of persecution or prosecution given that homosexuality is a criminal activity in Kenya punishable by up to 14 years in jail.

The relative anonymity offered by the Internet guarantees some form of privacy, freedom of speech, and is advantageous in a conservative and seemingly intolerant country like Kenya. As a respondent from GALCK argues, without their website, it would almost be impossible to offer legal, educative and other material relevant to the safety and health of the gay community in Kenya. Given the persecution faced by this group, their website has offered them an opportunity to replace the traditional, commercial media as a platform through which they can publish and articulate their issues and engage with disparate audiences and communities. Through this alternative space, in addition to, for example, Facebook and Twitter accounts that the GALCK run, they have been able network, construct their own narrative, identity and community linked with others in different parts of the world. They have also been able to network and contribute to queer discourses in Kenya and beyond. In other words, recent technologies, including the Internet and mobile telephony, have offered the gay and lesbian community in Kenya opportunities to establish their own alternative media and space in attempts to mainstream their issues in order to achieve various objectives.

So whereas societal norms and restrictions, and due to traditional and mainstream media biases and barriers that stifle their voices, the Internet has offered them the space vital for the advancement of their interests. In short, given the limited opportunities to access commercial media in Kenya, the Internet offers them a ‘democratised’ platform where they can interact “freely” and “safely”. Moreover, as an equalising agent, the Internet is not discriminatory and people irrespective of their backgrounds, ethnicity, colour, race, age, gender and sexual orientation can interact and participate as equals as long as they have the skills and resources necessary for accessing and utilising it (cf. Norris, 2001; Buckler and Dolowitz, 2005). In essence, by appropriating the Internet as their personal space, the gay community in Kenya is able to resist the stifling norms that they consider incongruent with their lifestyles and ideologies. This alternative platform also allows them to struggle for change, the alternative space for competing ideologies, and seek support from like-minded organisations and communities from around the world particularly when they feel threatened or when they are persecuted because of their difference.

Conclusion: Reimagining alternative media

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that alternative media has democratised media space in Kenya and given the marginalised the opportunity to mainstream their issues. It is also clear that alternative media suffers some identity crisis because they also aspire to be mainstream to give the issues they privilege prominence and weight. However, the fact it does not suffer the commercial pressures means alternative media can foil the power of commercialism and (elite) control.

Given the notion that the mainstream, corporatist media is obsessed with profitability, it would then almost be natural that the marginalised and disempowered should find an avenue through which they can express themselves.

In a country where even the so-called public (and state-owned) service media, for example, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation is profit-driven and elite-controlled, there is a desire to find alternative spaces or platforms that are 'democratic' and audience-centred both in outlook and operation. As such, there is little doubt that decommercialisation, democratisation and the ability to disentangle from discrimination and control, are key motivations for the setup of alternative media spaces. But these are by no means the only factors that inform setup. Although these drive the desire to find alternatives, they are by themselves incapable of offering or providing the opportunities and resources necessary for the setup of alternative media. Thus, resources – human, and non-human (monetary, time, and physical) – are vital in the setup and management of alternative media. Take the example of community media (for instance FM radio stations). Even though they are celebrated for mainstreaming community issues, they subscribe to corporate ideologies and strategies because they often need monetary and other resources to start and operate. Money is necessary to buy equipment, construct studios and meet running costs. Human capital is vital for their operations and management. Staff would need skills to operate and manage the equipment. Accordingly, capital is vital for any media, be they alternative or mainstream, operations.

Moreover, as seen above, even though decapitalisation is considered key to identification of alternative media, any mass media platform, as Hamilton (2000: 359) posits, 'requires a centralized, corporatized mode of organization to carry out mass-scale production and distribution'. This includes alternative media. Besides, even alternative media need mass-scale production and distribution, and maximum social impact, and thus have to adopt corporatised and technologised production approaches to have wide reach and impact (Hamilton, 2000). 'There is no getting around the fact that to ... have a chance of achieving goals of social change, one needs money – the more, the better,' argues Hamilton (2000: 359) in his argument that capital is a necessary precondition for success of any media setup. In essence, capital is critical to media productions, whether they are mainstream or alternative. In addition, there is evidence, for example instances the *Reject-The Star* relationship, that the symbiotic and complementary relationship is critical to the success of both mainstream and alternative media.

Given the above arguments then, views that deprofessionalisation of media, as well as democratization or production seem misplaced especially considering the validity and reliability of products sometimes produced by non-professionals. Accordingly, there is an overarching view that it is not the absence or presence of capital, professionalism and institutional mechanisms but the extent to which these variables contribute to and influence media productions and consumptions. In other words, while monetary issues are important, profit is not a motivation for its setup. They are often driven by the desire to offer a platform or expand the space for effective the articulation of issues of the marginalised, the disempowered and the lowly.

As seen above, it is almost impossible to have a purely alternative media in outlook and form. The alternative tends to have similar characteristics as those of the mainstream, and that sometimes aspire to be mainstream. This demonstrates the fact that there is need to rethink what alternative media is, its *modi operandi*, and the criteria for determining the meaning and outlook of the alternative.

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