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COVID-19 AND THE PRECARITY OF UGANDA'S PRINT MEDIA

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Introduction

Major crises are notorious for exposing, testing, stretching and smashing the resilience of systems designed to deal with them as well as individuals involved in different ways to stop these crises. Coronavirus/COVID-19 has more than lived up to this notoriety. For one thing, it shut down the world in ways previous global health crises such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) or Avian Flu did not since the turn of the new millennium. For a comparative pandemic, one needs to go back a whole century to the 1918 Spanish flu, which infected an estimated one-third of the world's human population and caused the death of at least 50 million people.¹

While this latest global health pandemic is still light years away from inflicting such devastation on the human race as the Spanish Flu, it has thus far stretched everyone beyond their limits. This includes Ugandan journalists and especially those working in print media; the bedrock of Ugandan journalism.² Many such reporters and news companies have been pushed on and over the edge by outright suspension or downsizing of operations and severe wage cuts. A few unfortunate workers have had their contracts terminated. Although speculations abound, it is early days to say with any certainty what permanent effects will remain, since these interruptions are said to be temporary. The full impact will only be assessed more efficiently when Coronavirus/COVID-19 has fully wrecked its havoc and been forced to move on.

For now, however, this much is true: this global health pandemic has completely exposed the precariousness of especially the print media industry in Uganda so much so that something ought to be done to keep it alive and kicking. For a long time, newspapers and the few, mostly lifestyle, magazines that exist have been struggling to survive as a going concern. Such financial constraints coupled with some few government/state squeezes to professional practise which are usually aimed at the printed press because of their unrivalled influence have seen many of its finest members exit for better, safer and less strenuous jobs leaving Ugandan journalism and the public it reports on worse for it. As such, the need to examine the fulcrum of Uganda's media has never been greater. Out of the pandemic that has laid bare its struggles must come its vaccine. After all, in Uganda's context saving print media might end up being cheaper than what is lost with it.

¹1918 Pandemic (H1N1 virus). (2019, March 20). Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>

²Stremmler, N., & Price E., M. (2009). *Media, Elections and Political Violence in Eastern Africa: Towards a Comparative Framework*. Oxford/London: University of Oxford/Annenberg School for Communication/University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved from <http://global.asc.upenn.edu/fileLibrary/PDFs/PostelectionViolencereport.pdf>

³Tumusiime, J. (2016). *A non-profit approach to market-driven journalism challenges in Uganda: A case study of Uganda Radio Network*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University.

Saving (print) journalism: Getting the question(s) right Sector

All good journalism rests on asking the right question(s) without fear or favour. So it follows that to save print journalism from the chokehold that has been slowly but steadily strangling it, which Coronavirus/COVID-19 has simply unveiled to the full glare of all and sundry, an open and serious discussion about its utility needs to gain front and centre position in public and policy debates. After all, saving print journalism has a direct effect on the whole media industry, given its dependence on it, and the Ugandan society more generally. The latter is insofar as the progress of any society depends on timely, accurate, robust and relevant information that majority of people can easily understand and use, which in Uganda's case only newspapers have so far been able to produce. Others, especially radio that is consumed by the majority simply copy and voice it. Until now, print media has been subsumed in peripheral discussions about the media in general. This approach has the effect to overshadow specific factors that are unique to it especially in Uganda's context, which too gets lost in generalised continental or global overviews or comparisons of media industries. The key question(s) that ought to guide this much-needed discussion should be: has print media, or the newspapers to be more specific, outlived their usefulness in Uganda? In other words, is the problem the medium (paper, that is) or the message it transmits (that is, nature of content) or both? If yes, is online publishing, the much-touted alternative, an effective replacement or will it become so with time? If no, what kind of salvation does the newspaper require and from where shall it come?

To ask such questions is not merely some clever way of resisting change as critics like to charge at proponents of newspapers. Rather, such lines of inquiry elevate the debate right into the heart of the matter, that is; the practise of good journalism, which the printed press has largely been exemplars of, the most effective or appropriate way to disseminate it and the cost of doing both. The claim by digital enthusiasts, the so-called netizens, that information wants to be free is hollow, to say the least. Suffice it to say all valuable information has a cost attached to its production. If in doubt, one only needs to check with any nation's intelligence organizations, which, like good journalism, are in the business of gathering reliable information albeit for different purposes.

In order to properly think of Uganda's print media, it may be worth borrowing a leaf from relationships. As couples are often cautioned, it is not particularly good thinking to first lose what you have in order to gain a full appreciation of its importance. After all, rarely, if ever at all, is the case made (in Uganda at least) that other platforms do better journalism than print and, therefore, whatever is lost in newspapers and magazines is or will be gained in what replaces them.

Moreover, it is important to temper the excitement of newness, which can sometimes be dangerous. New things are not necessarily automatically better than what they are replacing. The claims and hopes that come attached to them, the future their users conjure up based upon the promises they read into them are often undercut by the reality of the capabilities of these new things – media technologies in this case.⁴ As Williams (1974) has noted, “There is nothing inherent in the nature of a media technology that is responsible for the way a society uses it. It does not, and cannot, have an ‘essence’ that would inevitably create effects peculiar and exclusive to itself.”⁵ Lest we forget, what is scorned as old media today were once new. Inversely, what is hailed as “new” media today will be berated in more or less the same way in a future that lies not so far away.

COVID-19 and the shutdown of print media

For quite a while now, digital enthusiasts globally have been wishing death upon all newspapers, the oldest of all types of mass media, and celebrating hysterically whenever one has failed to financially support itself and collapsed – as indeed many have in mostly North America and Europe. These enthusiasts have hailed the invention of their latest obsession the internet and the world wide web it enables, and all the artefacts that the latter hosts such as the popular social media platforms, as perhaps the most important development in the history of communication than, say, radio or television ever were.⁶ Therefore, old, wobbling mediums like newspapers ought to accept this new reality and gracefully exit the stage for the new kids online or risk the embarrassment of being forced off – as seems to be the fate of those that have so far unfortunately been wound up by one crisis or another.

So it was that sometime in March when Coronavirus/COVID-19 further gripped and disrupted the world so much so that nearly every enterprise and known way of life slid into paralysis, print media being no exception, some African evangelists of the digital future lost no time to speak out how “the newspaper industry on the continent is staring death in the face” and that “sadly, there is no strategy on the horizon to save print from collapse.”⁷

⁴Lister, M. et al. (2003). *New Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge.

⁵Williams, R. (1974). *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Fontana/Collins, p. 132-133

⁶Barton, M. D. (2005). The Future of Rational-Critical Debate in Online Public Spheres. *Computers and Composition*, 177-190.

⁷Ntibinyane, N. (2020, April 16). Coronavirus may just be the end for many newspapers [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://inkjournalism.org/2135/coronavirus-may-just-be-the-end-for-many-newspapers/>

Such a dashing viewpoint was not entirely without good reason. After all, in Uganda, for example, five major news titles had suspended printing and circulation operations until further notice directly because of the pandemic. These titles are: *Observer*, a bold analytical weekly; *Orumuri*, *Etop*, *Rupiny*; the only vernacular weeklies in the west, east and northern Uganda respectively; and *Kampala Sun*, a popular tabloid. According to a tweet from the *Observer*, the paper had been curtailed by preventive measures the government had instituted in its attempts to contain Coronavirus/COVID-19.⁸ One such encumbering measure was restrictions to movement and transport, which complicated the paper's already thin and fragile circulation and distribution networks. The other papers did not give any one reason for their suspension but insider information suggests they had for long been posting losses and their top management took advantage of the revving pandemic to swing the axe on them.

Another weekly magazine whose management/ownership has been mulling over reshaping its publication cycle to a monthly is likely to have its decisions informed by the pandemic. Its once bustling newsroom, which constantly attracted a stream of experienced and interning national and foreign reporters alike, is now all but a shell. If the more established titles are struggling this way, it is not hard to imagine what is happening to smaller, nontrade titles. They inevitably are headed down the same dark alley, beckoned by the same forces that have suffocated their giant counterparts.

Apart from the *Observer*, which is privately owned, the rest of the suspended titles belong to the Vision Group where the government holds a 53.3 percent stake.⁹ As the biggest advertiser in Uganda, the majority shareholder inevitably channels a huge chunk of her advertisement spend to the company's extensive portfolio that hitherto comprised 10 newspaper titles, three television stations, six radio stations, two lifestyle magazines, several websites and commercial printing services.¹⁰ Moreover, the Group's flagship publication *New Vision* is not only the largest circulating English daily in Uganda, it is supplied to nearly all public and private offices on a daily basis as if it were mandatory thus boosting its revenues. Meanwhile, nearly all its major competitors are constantly lambasted and demonised as anti-government and their operations often interrupted as a result. Such regular attacks limit the public's free association with these papers and severely undercut their revenues from both circulation and advertising.¹¹

⁸The *Observer* [observer.ug]. (2020, March 31). CLARIFICATION. [Twitter moment]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/observerug/status/1245015944147197953>

⁹<https://visiongroup.co.ug/shareholders/>

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Tabaire, B. (2007). The Press and Political Repression in Uganda: Back to the Future? *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 193-211.

Cost cutting newsgathering

Ordinarily, one would have thought that with the kind of government support Vision Group enjoys and that many other news companies crave for, Uganda's largest news media company should have instead stepped up its reportage across all its platforms during the Coronavirus/COVID-19 crisis, its political leanings notwithstanding. On the contrary, not only did they shut down the four newspapers, they also not long after slashed staff salaries by 60, 45 and 40 percent respectively depending on one's pay scale.¹²To that end, Coronavirus/COVID-19 revealed Vision Group's underbelly as well as that of Monitor Publications, a subsidiary of the wealthy Nairobi based Nation Media Group, which are the publishers of *New Vision's* counterweight *Daily Monitor*. They too scaled back their operations at a time they should have been doubling them in order to provide more critical coverage of the government's response to the pandemic. None of the other mediums, especially the much-touted online platforms, has stepped up to fill the void. As such, in the absence of sharp scrutiny *Daily Monitor*, *Observer* and such other privately-owned newspapers are quite known for, the official narrative, which often obsesses too much about building and protecting the government/state's image, flies about without any checks thus impoverishing the public's ability to make well informed choices. Therein lies one of the most important functions that is or will be lost with the death of newspapers.

Whereas the managements of the suspended titles expressed optimism about their return onto the streets once Coronavirus/COVID-19 is forced to vacate them, the likelihood of this happening is not worth betting on unless some real fundamental changes are instituted regarding how news is funded, produced, marketed and sold. According to one radio own owner, many media houses have been in a perpetual struggle to keep afloat way before the pandemic struck¹³ newspapers and other print platforms more so than most since the scale or size of their operations is bigger. For instance, a radio station can easily afford to hire one person to three (or even more) positions, say, to gather the news, edit and present it as well as host a programme or two – as is their wont. A newspaper on the other hand cannot assign one person to report the news, edit, sub and revise it as well as run the presses, insert the pages together, distribute and even vend/sell it. Even an hour-long television news bulletin hardly contains a quarter of news items in any given newspaper regardless of the number of its pages. Yet even then, newspaper reporters constantly complain of being overworked and underpaid since they now have to file copy to different platforms: the traditional paper, its digital equivalent and a sister publication as well.

¹²Okello, G. (2020, April 30). MEDIA CRISIS! Giants Vision Group, NMG announce huge salary cuts. PML Daily. <https://www.pmldaily.com/news/2020/04/media-crisis-giants-vision-group-nmg-announce-huge-salary-cuts.html> 17<http://www.mtc.go.ug/status-of-uganda-trade-amidst-covid-19/>

¹³Nahabwe, I. [Innocent]. (2020, April 7). Today morning, I had a discussion with Simon Njala of NBS TV on why government needs to support the media houses. [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from <https://web.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Innocent%20Nahabwe>

Any attempt to raise the challenging working conditions in the newsroom that overwork and underpay fractionally represent and which, needless to say, have a direct effect on the quality of output, is treated as anathema. News managers/executives are often quick to emphasise how journalism is a calling, say, like priesthood. Therefore, those who aim to become wealthy through it ought to try something else, lawyering or trading perhaps. Unsurprisingly, reporters have taken news managers/executives on their word in ways they hardly anticipated. Quite a number actually went back to school and added a law degree to their resume, making the newsroom all but a staging point as they find their feet in the legal world. Yet even then, they, as with many other journalists, "often rely on sponsorship in order to make reporting trips with the concomitant problem that their coverage may be influenced/limited."¹⁴

Additionally, a lot of reporters no longer have qualms taking payments from the people they report on. It is not uncommon today for any public or private organisation with an event they would like covered in the news to budget for media/-journalists' "facilitation". As matter of fact, it is expected. Failure to provide journal-ists "transport refund" all but equals absence from the news. The more unscrupu-lous journalists "even extort money from government officials/businessmen by inventing stories and threatening to publish them if they are not paid off."¹⁵ News executives/managers know this all too well but they have yet to crack it down with the force it deserves because to do so would require them to provide or increase the facilitation they avail reporters, which they might be unwilling or genuinely unable to do.

As it stands, cost cutting that a dogged focus on the bottom line introduced into the newsroom the phrase became so pervasive as if it were a cardinal dictum of journalism that has to be adhered to without fail, neither rescued the bottom line it came to save nor improved the quality of reporting. Apparently, out of over 350 radio and television stations and the several newspaper titles and online outlets in Uganda, less than 30 percent make profit."¹⁶ So, in the absence of a clear, sustainable way to save print journalism from collapse, it is unsurprising then when one digital future evangelist offered the zinger: "Post-Coronavirus we should let newspapers die a slow and painful death and move on to other platforms. Time to move on guys, the party is over."¹⁷

¹⁴Schiffirin, A. (2011). NOT REALLY ENOUGH: Foreign donors and journalism training in Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda. In Franklin, B. ed. *The Future of Journalism*. Oxford: Routledge, pp. 321-333

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Nahabwe, I. [Innocent]. (2020, April 7).

¹⁷Ntibinyane, N. (2020, April 16)

Does Uganda need newspapers anymore?

Yet before anyone rushes to turn off the newsroom lights, there is need to critically ask whether the newspapers' party in Uganda is truly over before the proverbial old lady sings? Hardly. The age defining task of saving print media in Uganda is not an altruistic one. Nor should it be embarked on without a thorough analysis of the utility of the printed press relative to the shape or nature of Uganda's media scape and life in general. Whereas it is a truth universally acknowledged that newspapers are the least consumed media whether in Uganda or across Africa¹⁸, whatever they have lost in mass consumption that they once monopolised they have more than retained in importance/influence. As veteran Ugandan journalist and commentator Charles Onyango-Obbo has reportedly noted before, print media is what really matters not just in Uganda but across Africa.¹⁹ The reasons are aplenty so elucidation of at least three will suffice.

First and most importantly, whereas majority of Ugandans (52 percent, according to the 2018 Afrobarometer survey) report getting their daily news from radio than any other medium, far few know that that news and even the topical issues that inform all kinds of talk shows comes to them courtesy of newspapers. Majority of radio stations across Uganda completely lack the wherewithal to produce their own original, in-depth and countrywide coverage that print media generates.²⁰ Many of them do not even have basic functional newsrooms.²¹ So, while radios "may spread the message the fastest, it is the print journalists who are most often setting and defining that message."²² So for all intents and purposes, radio is all but an extension of print media. For that reason, the death of newspapers in Uganda might as well spell the death of robust news and information, which the country needs more of and costs an arm and leg to produce. How might Uganda look like afterwards? That ought to be allowed to sink in first before turning off the presses.

Second, print journalism prides itself in writing the first draft of history under two key assumptions: one, that history matters and that other people/professions such as historians will write the final draft. Yet in a country such as Uganda that seems averse to keeping proper records of itself, the first draft of events that print journalists sometimes hastily put together to beat deadlines, and also because they lack requisite funding to do more, often is the only account that comes to exist when the dust settles. As it has been said already, a people/place without its own memory is dead. Thus, the Igbo proverb Chinua Achebe popularised that "a man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body."

¹⁸Conroy-Krutz, J. & Appiah-Nyamekye, J. S. (2019). How free is too free? Across Africa, media freedom is on the defensive. Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 57

¹⁹In Stremmlau, N., & Price E., M. (2009). Media, Elections and Political Violence in Eastern Africa: Towards a Comparative Framework. Oxford/London: University of Oxford/Annenberg School for Communication/University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved from <http://global.asc.upenn.edu/fileLibrary/PDFs/PostelectionViolencereport.pdf>

²⁰Mugumya, L. (2017). "Verbal Duels" and Election Violence Reportage in Uganda's Media. In J. Oloka-Onyango and J. Ahikire (Eds), Controlling Consent: Uganda's 2016 Elections (pp.305-335). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press

²¹Kibazo, P., and Kanaabi, H. (2007). FM Stations in Uganda. Kampala: Eastern Africa Media Institute.

²²Stremmlau, N. (2008). The Press and Consolidation of Power in Ethiopia and Uganda (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (UMI Number: U613392)

In this regard, therefore, the printed press is very much an essential public good, a national treasure in fact, in ways that cannot be said of online publishing that is vigorously touted as its replacement in clear absence of evidence that it produces better reporting. The printed press is a critical cornerstone of development in the same way as can be said of education, healthcare services, transport infrastructure and the production sectors. If these and similar other sectors are the engine on which the country runs, the printed press is the oil/fuel that keeps that engine functional insofar as it keeps the spotlight on their performance.

Third, the printed press easily lends itself to comprehensive analysis because it tasks those who engage with it to take themselves seriously. Talk is cheap. Writing it not. As Onyango-Obbo has eloquently argued, "In print you have the policy debate. In Africa, you cannot have policy debates in any sensible way in the broadcast media. For call-in shows in Uganda and a lot of Africa their function is for people to vent. People go home after they have vented. They don't actually call so their point of view can form the basis of government action but they call spur-of-the-moment. It is not recorded. But the people that write in the media are very meticulous, they do their research, it is the intellectual forum."²³ Too boot as a well organised, easily accessible and manageable medium, relative to broadcast or digital media, the printed press is a boon to many a researcher.²⁴

Now, all this and more that has not been elucidated (such as newspapers educative functions as teaching/learning/communicative materials) is not to say Uganda's printed press is not imperfect. Far from it! For one thing, it is afflicted by the same malaise, if not more so, as all other news organisations globally that "intent on projecting authority and knowledge, rarely admit their fallibility or lack of omniscience."²⁵ Yet to use this charge to pass a death sentence on only the printed press is nothing more than scapegoating it unless it is done in recognition that as the foundation of all journalism it deserves a far harsher punishment.

²³In Stremmlau, N., & Price E., M. (2009).

²⁴Walulya, G. (2017). Hybrid Journalism? An investigation into press coverage of elections in East Africa's one-party dominant states of Tanzania and Uganda. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Oslo, Oslo.

²⁵Lerner, M. K. (2020, April 13). Journalists are recognizing they're writing a rough draft of history - and can't say definitively 'that's the way it is'. <https://theconversation.com/journalists-are-recognizing-theyre-writing-a-rough-draft-of-history-and-cant-say-definitively-thats-the-way-it-is-135875>

Parting shot(s): where shall salvation for Uganda's print media come from?

Some commentators have advocated more funding, including from the public purse, as the salvation of the media in general²⁶. That needs to be done simultaneously with restating or rekindling awareness about the utility of especially print media insofar as it is the turn point of Ugandan journalism and society in order to maximise gains from every cent invested in the media. It should not continually be assumed that the utility of the media is well-known and understood. It is not. Otherwise, the public would show more trust in this now beleaguered profession notwithstanding its shortcomings, which also need urgent attention, such as the opaqueness that they keep kept around how the news process works, which also need urgent attention.

Yet, as it is, across Africa generally Afrobarometer data shows ordinary people are growing sceptical of the media and the value that free media bring to society. This is in spite of the public's sustained belief in and support for the media's watchdog role over government, that is; to constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.²⁷ This public scepticism is fuelled by the perception, not entirely unfounded, that media are "prop-agators of falsehoods, bias, and hate speech, particularly when messages are critical of politicians or policies they support."²⁸ No other medium whips up these public sentiments than online and social media networks much praised as the future of news, which many people and research bodies fear are havens for fake news, hate speech, and other biased content.

On average, across 31 countries surveyed between 2011 and 2018, support for media freedom declined by 10 percentage points (from 56% to 46%) while support for government control increased by the same margin (39% to 49%).²⁹ This decline would even be steeper were the timeline stretched back to 2008 but for a difference in the wording of the survey question. What is more, the decline is more drastic in Tanzania (-33 percentage points), Cape Verde (-27) and Uganda (-21).

As if that is not troubling enough, whereas most people across Africa perceive media freedoms to be increasing they are unconvinced it is a good thing. This contradicts two related claims by foreign media certification. freedom watchdogs that these freedoms are in decline and their increase would be a good thing to Africa. "In fact, among citizens who see media freedoms as increasing in their country, those calling for increased government restrictions on media significantly outnumber those who support broad press freedoms."³⁰ .

²⁶Serunkuma, Y. (2017, May 17). May the last journalist not switch off the lights, please! Observer. <https://observer.ug/viewpoint/52890-may-the-last-journalist-not-switch-off-the-lights-please>. See also: Serunkuma, Y. (2017, June 2). May the last journalist not switch off the lights, please! (part II) <https://observer.ug/viewpoint/53176-may-the-last-journalist-not-switch-off-the-lights-please-part-ii>; Bichachi, C.O. (2020, April 10). Yes, media needs public money to survive but on what terms? Daily Monitor. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/OpEd/Commentary/Yes--media-needs-public-money-to-survive-but-on-what-terms-/689364-5520396-njva9az/index.html>

²⁷Conroy-Krutz, J. & Appiah-Nyamekye, J. S. (2019).

²⁸ibid

²⁹ibid.

³⁰ibid.

Thus, in a situation where consumers of news media in general are not overly enthusiastic about the media's right or need to work freely, is it not a fool's errand to discuss which medium should be killed or allowed to die to give way to another? Repairing the public's trust in the media generally might be a more assured pathway to their salvation than more money can buy.

To that end, rather than naively blame Coronavirus/COVID-19 for hammering the last nail in the coffin of print media, it should be charged with the "good" crime it actually committed, which is merely to expose to everyone print media's struggles and tribulations beyond the commonly known ones such as government threats and squeezes especially regarding privately owned platforms. Given the utility of print media in Uganda, which this paper has only scratched the surface of, the time to move on from it has not yet reached. Rather, the need and opportunities to bolster it can only be limited by the public's imagination and engagement with it. Whereas news executives/managers are best placed to lead efforts to turn the tide against the printed press, such work, however clearly cut out, should not be abandoned to them alone. After all, they are not the only beneficiaries of good journalism.

About the Author

Gaaki Kigambo is a writer with lifelong professional and scholarly interests in mainly print media, journalism and communication, politics and current affairs, literature, society and the performing arts. His work on these subjects has appeared in *Daily Monitor*, *Observer*, *Independent*, *The East African*, *World Politics Review* and *Pambazuka*. His work has also been published as chapters in two books: *Independent Uganda: The First 50 Years 1962-2012* and *NRM 25 Years: Politics, Policies and Personalities*.

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