

Kenyan media has sacrificed moral decency

I have countless times warned in this column about the influence of the media on public opinion and by extension our national security, order and morality. Indeed, in every country with a semblance of democracy, the media are the moral conscience of the nation and a critical tool for development. In a nutshell, the media represent the hopes and aspirations of the people.

By [Ezekiel Mutua](#) 23 Mar 2011

Progressive democracies the world over have professional media institutions such as editors' guilds and media councils to enforce standards and regulation of the industry to ensure that consumers of media products are protected against harmful products.

The rationale behind this is that the media represent one of the most potent commands and platforms for human interaction and development anywhere in the world. Their potential to do good is matched only by their sheer potential for evil.

One of journalism's greatest occupational hazards

From my experience both as a practicing journalist and information policy bureaucrat, I can say without any fear of contradiction that one of the greatest occupational hazards of the media is the prospect of a journalist becoming an isolationist, and developing the redundant characteristics of occupants of ivory towers, becoming a sadist, an extortionist, a blackmailer or a pervert.

Yet, among Kenyan media practitioners there exists an even worse variety of journalists than the denizen of an ivory tower or extortionist - the journalist or media house who sacrifice moral decency at the altar of instant gratification and profiteering, and yet continue to masquerade as independent and objective purveyors of information.

What's worse, is the fact that a variety of media practitioners who are nothing short of social misfits or outright deviants to social norms, occupy senior positions in newsrooms where they whimsically publish pornography. Call me a moralist, for all I care, but if the media were to set the agenda for society, then our children would be in grave danger indeed.

Why the graphic images?

A story in *The Star* daily last week, regarding the reprehensible sexual escapades at Muliro Gardens in Kakamega is a testimony to the flippant crop of editors that run the show in some media houses. How on earth did explicit photos of fellows having sex in a public garden end up on the pages of a national paper?

Pray, what value did the publishing of the offending photo add to the story, save to an editor with a vicarious mind? In fact an editor who publishes such photos obviously possesses a mind no better than that of the culprits.

This country has been treated to some of the most egregious effects of debased editorial cast of mind and malpractice in the past in both the print and electronic media. Morally offending editorial content has been spewed through the radio, television and online media, in the most reckless manner imaginable.

Worse still, is the fact that most media houses nowadays specialise in force-feeding their publics, ramming down their throats, the most unsavoury messages, practices and attitudes. Has the media sector taken to the matatu culture defined by ignorance and arrogance? In fact, both industries have separately created a culture treating their customers with disdain and making no apologies about it.

Dubious distinctions

Today, the media and the matatu industries have become part of our youth culture, fusing music, fashion, and drugs use with computer graphics in vehicles that are virtually nightclubs on wheels. Private radio broadcasters are joining the matatu industry at the hip as the most abusive, pollutant (including noise pollution) and irritating service sub-sectors in Kenya. Surely, both rank very high in the world in these dubious distinctions.

However, a new dimension in the media is the culture of dedicating acres of space focusing on mythic characters. How come most media outlets do not consider utilising the same energy, space and resource to cover more important issues like economic development, culture, sports, environment or even technology?

The mass media is today replete with a sensationalism craze and the celebrity sub-culture which is becoming deeply entrenched and permeates everyday life, to a point where it seems unfashionable to run a newspaper without a picture of a half-naked woman somewhere on the pages.

Poor sense of judgment? Poor sense of taste?

Is it that our editors have a poor sense of judgment when it comes to moral values, taste and tone, or is it that pervasion, pornography and celebrity-cult is what the people want to read and hear? Does it mean that Kenyans have become so debased as to prefer sordid pornographic and weird celebrity content as opposed to developmental stuff?

Just check how the ever increasing number of magazines and newspapers compete to get the most graphic illustration of celebrities and their misdeeds. Some have made it their calling to incorporate nudity as a culture on the centre pages of their newspaper magazines, without batting an eyelid.

And as the media continues making this 'bling bling statement' by propagating the culture of pimped cars, fancy lifestyles, jewellery, sagged trousers and nudity - what lessons can we learn from the current state of media in this country? Is it safe anymore for a parent to let their kids read a newspaper, watch the television or listen to the radio alone?

There is a key lesson for every editor and media practitioner in Kenya in the words of Thomas Jefferson who warned that; a nation as a society forms a moral person, and every member of it is personally responsible for his society. Let's play our part in making our shared space a better abode. It starts with you and me!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ezekiel Mutua is the director of Information and Public Communications of the Republic of Kenya; email [emutua@information.go.ke].

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