

**IS THE REVOLUTION HERE YET?
IMPACT OF MOBILE PHONES AND THE INTERNET
ON UGANDA'S NEWS MEDIA AND PUBLIC LIFE**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that new information technologies, particularly the Internet, the Web, and the mobile phone, like elsewhere in the world, are transforming news and journalism in Uganda and forcing news organizations to restructure in order to centrally integrate them in their operations. They, particularly mobile phones, have expanded the horizon for expression, enabling many ordinary citizens, who hitherto had no opportunity, to become involved in public debates and express their views and perspectives. They are critical alternative platforms against restrictions to the media and free expression. Yet challenges remain. They are easily susceptible to abuse, which has the negative effect of creating misunderstanding, animosity and disrupting any meaningful debate. This also devalues their impact. Moreover, their levels of penetration, relative to the total population, remains low. Any significant impact they potentially have, especially, on the country's democratic processes over time is dependent on how fast this penetration increases.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: SHIFTS IN THE NEWS MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Throughout time, human beings have faced unique needs and challenges that have compelled them to find ways, techniques and tools with which to tackle them. These solutions have, in turn, changed their ways of life and inadvertently set the course of generations that have followed. The most salient solutions have been inventing or improving upon existing technologies, which has led some scholars to note that technologies are “a vitally important aspect of the human condition” (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999, p. 3). These scholars have added that, “For good or ill, [technologies] are woven inextricably into the fabric of our lives from birth to death” and that, “all our lives are intertwined with technologies, from simple tools to large technical systems” (Ibid.).

Technologies feature prominently in how, as human beings, we communicate and exchange information. And as we have invented or improved upon them, they have inevitably changed the way we communicate, the quantity of, the speed at which we move information from one point to another and how far we are able to extend it. In the United States, for example, as James Carey has noted, the construction of the railroad and the invention of the telegraph enabled something nearing a regular and periodical national system of communication because the railroad and telegraph linked every American town and synchronized all time zones (1998). More broadly, as other observers have noted, “Every significant new publishing phenomenon has been midwifed by a great leap in technology” (Welch, 2005, p. 374). The movable-type printing press gave rise to the

Gutenberg Bible, the offset press the alternative newspapers, while laser printers and desktop publishing underwrote newsletters and magazines and helped spawn the business journal (Ibid.).

There is little, if any, disagreement that today's leading information technologies are chiefly the Internet, or simply the Net, the World Wide Web, or simply the Web, and the mobile phone, particularly in many regions of the world categorized as underdeveloped or developing. These technologies are widely perceived as new and are generically referred to either as new information technologies or new media in most cases. This study will use the terms interchangeably. It will also, with regard to Uganda, discuss the impact of the Internet (see Chapter Four) separately from that of mobile phones (see Chapter Five) as the two are different, given the difference in levels of penetration and adoption. As will become clear, there are many more people with access to mobile phones than there are to the Internet.

Because of this perceived newness, which is examined in-depth in the next chapter, in most of the so-called developed world where they have almost achieved ubiquity, the discourse about them is that they have not only profoundly changed ways in which people communicate and exchange information but their entire lives in ways unmatched by technologies that preceded them. In the rest of the world where their penetration remains low, at best, and non-existent, at worst, their transformative effects remain mostly a pipe dream.

Consider, for instance, the Internet, which as some commentators have noted "has grown faster than anything else you can name" and email, one of its prominent features, "represents the single most profound change in the way human beings communicate since

the telephone” (McNamara, 2003). As Rick Levine et al. noted, the cliché about the Net is that it changes everything and that, “The passion of the Web is remaking every social structure its meeting, including government, education, entertainment and, yes, business” (2000, pp. ix, xi). Other observers have touted the Net as “without doubt one of the most influential developments in the history of communication, at least as important as the invention of radio and television, if not more so” (Barton, 2005, p. 177), and that it “should be understood as the first instance of a global communication system” (Carey, 1998, p. 28).

Interestingly for journalism, and news media in general, the Net and the Web were invented to improve upon communication, and to quicken and simplify access to information. For that reason, Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams have noted that, “From the Internet’s inception its creators envisioned a universal substrate linking all mankind and its artifacts in a seamless, interconnected web of knowledge” (2006, p. 37). The Web, invented 20 years later, amplified the Net’s vision as “an Alexandrian library of all past and present information and a platform for collaboration to unite communities of all stripes in any conceivable act of creative enterprise” (Ibid.). As Tim Berners-Lee, its inventor, noted, “The goal of the Web was to be a shared information space through which people (and machines) could communicate” (2007). Its “intent was that this space should span from a private information system to a public information, from high value carefully checked and designed material, to off-the-cuff ideas which make sense only to a few people and may never be read again” (Ibid.).

Focus of the Thesis

John Pavlik, a journalism scholar, has noted that news and journalism are undergoing major transformations on account of new information technologies, which might have no close comparison (2001). There is an extensive body of knowledge detailing this transformation but almost all of it is focused on and reflects the experiences of mainly North America, Europe, and a few parts of Asia that have more recently experienced rapid economic growth, where, as earlier mentioned, new information technologies have become almost ubiquitous.

For purposes of this thesis, the African continent has remained largely absent from mainstream discussions about new media mainly due to the continuous constraints borne out of a general limitation in access to these latest technologies. Interestingly, as Peter Mwesige has noted, there has been a lot of interest in the “so-called digital divide between the industrialized countries of the North and the poor countries of the South” and much attention has been focused “more on extending the new information and communication technologies infrastructure and expanding access than on what the users actually do with such access” (2004, pp. 83-84).

As such, this thesis examines the impact of new information technologies on news media in Uganda. It does so by attempting to answer the following central questions: In what ways are the Internet and mobile phones changing, or not changing, journalism in Uganda, both as a profession and as a business? What challenges do they pose to the research, publication and dissemination of news and information? To what extent have they expanded the horizon for free expression among ordinary citizens? What potential

do they have to promote or support democratic processes in Uganda? And, what do they mean for the future of news and news media in the country?

Uganda was among the first countries in Africa to have full Internet connectivity.¹ It was the first to fully open both its media, particularly the airwaves, and telecommunications sector. Following this liberalization, FM radio has exploded and millions of Ugandans are connected to mobile phones, a large majority of whom are accessing telecommunication services for the very first time. The Internet, however, has not been as successful as it remains largely in the capital and a few major urban centres. Yet that has not rendered its impact negligible, as this thesis will demonstrate.

This thesis posits that both technologies are fast becoming central to the operations of many, if not all, the news publications in Uganda. They are enabling more public participation in the news process as there are more opportunities to share opinions and comment on stories as well as suggest tips, which news outlets highly encourage. They are certainly affecting circulation, as some people choose to read the publications' online editions instead of buying print editions. As will become clear later in the thesis, all major print publications studied for this research are considering serious restructuring and readjustments to optimally accommodate new media as vital alternative platforms. For some publications, this is directly to address the problem of low circulation, while for others, it is to address issues of state repression and restrictions to media freedom.

For radio broadcasting, almost all stations are shifting towards more interactive programming. This is in recognition of the listeners' increasing interest in calling and

¹ Access to Internet in Uganda has evolved in phases. In the first phase it was only possible to send and receive email. Full connectivity means the ability to access the whole web and not just email.

expressing themselves on the issues of the day. The ability of average citizens with access to mobile phones to actively participate in radio programs and voice their opinions is very empowering and potentially has far-reaching impact on the country's democratic process. As Bernard Tabaire, formerly managing editor of *Daily Monitor* and now a media trainer and consultant, said in an interview for this thesis, as calling into radio stations becomes even more pervasive, a strong consciousness will be built around the practice and expectations will be raised that any attempts to roll back such participation will trigger a lot of resistance because people have come to view it as a right or entitlement to use their technological gadgets any way they want (2009).

Both the Net and mobile phones have, undoubtedly, eased and quickened the journalist's work with regards to gathering, making sense, packaging and disseminating information. It is a unique advantage new media boast over other means of communication. They are a potentially invaluable solution to outmanoeuvre authoritarian control of news and information and the means of disseminating it. Yet the quality of stories reported has not changed in any significant way. For instance, there is no rigorous scrutiny of public records or statements by public officials. Much of the reporting is still events-driven and clearly reproduces who said what.

Moreover, the downside is that both technologies are susceptible to abuse. They are hard, although not totally impossible, to control. The state can institute extreme measures such as heavily censoring the Net and suspending telecom operations. That being said, their susceptibility to abuse means that utter falsehoods and misinformation can easily be perpetuated as fast as they are created, which, like any other platform, hurts their value. Therefore, an accurate assessment of new information technologies needs to

balance their advantages against such and other challenges that will be further elaborated on in this thesis.

Because the growth of new information technologies is exacerbating the problem of low newspaper circulation, this thesis posits that they, along other factors such as the need for media companies to boost their influence, are also accelerating media convergence. News outlets that started out exclusively as print are adding radio and television stations to their names in order to diversify sources of revenue and stem declining newspaper copy sales. For instance, New Vision, Uganda's largest circulating newspaper, has opened television stations and opened or acquired several radio stations across the country. Media convergence and conglomeration have been criticized in places where they have taken root for, among other reasons, promoting corporate agendas and narrowing the variety of views and perspectives.

Technology, Change and the Western Media

To support an argument of this nature, it is necessary first to examine the impact of new media on news and journalism in the developed world where they originate. This is not to suggest the technologies will evolve and have the similar impact everywhere else, but these experiences provide a good indication of how they might likely be adopted elsewhere.

In much of the developed world, new media have emerged as critical alternative sources of information for a growing percentage of people, mostly especially the young. There are varied reasons to explain this, as shall be discussed shortly, but their emergence

proves an important characteristic about journalism, that by its very nature the profession seems in a state of constant flux, just as the society it mirrors.

Every so often a new or improved technology, shifts in socio-cultural and political debates, seminal events and gross failures by the media, among many other reasons, have touched off changes in the way journalism is conceptualized and practiced and how it is produced and supplied. As political philosopher Jürgen Habermas noted, one of the enduring changes has been a shift by newspapers, being the oldest of all types of media, “[F]rom mere institutions for the publication of news into bearers and leaders of public opinion – weapons of party politics” (1974, p. 53). Today’s newspapers and other media that have since been invented owe their power and influence to set the public agenda as well as *mediating and/or intensifying public discussion to this shift*.

Norms of journalism too, have evolved over the past 200 years to “the codified and monolithic model that they now seem to be” (MacKinnon, 2005, p. 22). The principle of objectivity, for instance, that stands as the ethical touchstone of journalism and which news media continuously struggle to achieve has not always been one of journalism’s daunting tasks. As Dan Gillmor noted, throughout the 19th century when newspapers flourished, many of them cared less about whatever we now call objectivity. They had had points of view, reflecting the politics of their backers and owners and were never afraid to articulate them (2006, p. 2). Media critics, especially in North America and Europe, have noted that news media have all but failed to uphold objectivity and may be retreating to articulating given worldviews which those who run the institutions or their funders are inclined to themselves.

In terms of production and supply, technological advancement has quickened the work of a journalist as well as how far information can go. In a way then, the Net, the Web and, in much of the underdeveloped world, the mobile phone, all follow in this well-worn path by technologies they have succeeded. They differ, however, in their effects and it is these which clearly distinguish and almost make them incomparable to the technologies that have preceded them. Unlike the past technological leaps, journalism under the Net and the Web is “undergoing a fundamental transformation, perhaps the most fundamental since the rise of the penny press of the mid-nineteenth century” (Pavlik, 2001, p. xi).

As Charlie Beckett, a communications scholar and author, has noted, new technologies have made it “much easier and cheaper to be a journalist now than it was five or ten years ago. With a mobile phone, a hand-held video camera and a laptop with Internet, journalists are now exponentially more productive than they were five years ago” (2008, p. 11). The same tools, however, have democratized the journalist’s work. For the very first time in history, blogging – one of the most popular features of these new technologies – has given average people with access to networked computers and the requisite skills to operate them the “ability to write, edit, design, and publish their own editorial product” and potentially “to be read and responded to by millions of other people” (Welch, 2005, p. 373).

Authors David Kline and Dan Burstein have quoted Jay Rosen, an author and media scholar, noting more eloquently how the idea that the public is now capable of producing media content is “totally revolutionary” and essentially shatters professional journalism as we know it. “Journalists always try to keep citizens in a box that journalists

want them in. The classic [journalistic] statement is, “Here’s the news and here’s the forum you can discuss it in.” Well, now people can create their own forum and anything can happen”” (2005, p. 318).

Owing to these possibilities, it is now hard for professional journalism to claim superiority over news, politics and the provision of facts to public debate (p. 319). The media’s self-appointed gate-keeping role, through which they control their readers’ or viewers’ knowledge of the world through the privileged events they choose to report on and how they report on them, is increasingly weakening. As a result, Rosen has noted that, “the old political contract between news providers and news consumers will give way to something different, founded on...a new “balance of power”” (Ibid.).

There is growing evidence to support this kind of observation. A number of mainstream or legacy media are increasingly opening space, especially on their online editions, for people to contribute their own material. CNN’s iReport is a classic example. Under this feature, CNN encourages its viewers to record videos of events they deem newsworthy and submit them to CNN, which, in turn, airs them either as a special program or as segments during other programs.

Whereas the power shifts between the news media and news consumers is a positive contribution of new technologies, an equally important but rarely heard debate, particularly now in the age of the Internet where anyone can publish anything and the strong support that has been shown towards net neutrality, is the contentious one about the absoluteness of free speech.

Admittedly, this chapter, or indeed this thesis, is not the place to explore the extents of such debate. That being said, what can be sufficiently noted here is that

generally, it is agreed that there is yet to emerge a society in which anything nearing free speech exists. As Stanley Fish has argued, “[A]bstract concepts like free speech do not have any “natural” content but are filled with whatever content and direction one can manage to put into them” (1994, p. 102). For that reason, “every society places some limits on the exercise of speech because speech always takes place within a context of competing values” (Mill, 2008).

Equally important is the fact that just as discrimination of opposing views, censorship, media restrictions or repression of free expression is unacceptable, this same standard should also be applied to any situation in which one is allowed to say or publish anything one wants. Therefore, contrary to those who, drawing on the slippery slope analogy, “warn that the consequence of limiting speech is the inevitable slide into censorship and tyranny,” the real challenge, therefore, “is always to decide how far up or down we choose to go, not whether we should step off the slope altogether,” since no chance of doing that exists in the first place (Mill, 2008).

As the discussion below, and later in Chapter Four, makes clear, people’s ability to make informed choices is enhanced by access to timely, truthful and factual news and information, which is what news media are about, or at least claim to be. The quality of journalism, and by extension the role of the media as a platform for enhancing democratic processes, is grossly jeopardized every time people publish any information, be it online or in the more traditional platforms, that is difficult to prove or is biased towards a given worldview, or agenda. This is true in more advanced economies as it is in fledgling ones, if not more so. As Andrew M. Mwenda, managing editor of the weekly *Independent* newsmagazine, said in an interview for this thesis, “people lose faith” and

“the mainstream reader is unable to decipher what is the truth and what the lie is” (2009). As a result, the reader tunes out of the news, and consequently out of the democratic process.

Theoretical Contestations and Media Failures

New media, and the effects they underwrite, have re-ignited an old debate about technologies, which pits two perspectives against each other; technological determinism, which argues that technologies shape human life, and social determinism, whose view is that human beings shape and direct technology.

These debates, which are not limited to journalism and communication and are discussed at length in the following chapter, arise because of the need to properly contextualize the impact of new technologies to human life. Suffice it to say here that most of the analysis on the Internet and the Web, as Levine et al. have noted, “has been extremely insular, looking at the dynamics of the online world as a class of phenomena unto itself” (1999, p. ix). Yet, “while it’s true that global networks are catalysts of change, it’s even more critical to see them as responses to a world that was already changing when they arrived on the scene” (Ibid.).

People’s expectations today are evidently far more individualistic than “under the homogenous stereotypes imposed by broadcast media” (Ibid.). Therefore, the main reason new media have had such a strong and fast appeal is because they reflect these individual expectations and interests in a far more representative way than existing media can claim to (Ibid.).

Beckett has further elaborated how new information technologies have not reshaped the world on their own. They emerged amidst broader socio-political changes, which have included “global political realignments”, and “a more general shift in the way that people live their lives as individuals and communities”, all of which have impacted the outlook of the public sphere (2008, p. 34).

The concept of the public sphere is discussed more in detail in the following chapter, but as Habermas, who articulated it better than most, long noted, “The idea of the public sphere...threatens to disintegrate with the structural transformation of the public sphere itself. It could only be realized today, on an altered basis...” (1974, p. 55). The Internet, as Beckett has argued, “is fundamental to that “altered basis” (2008, p. 35).

According to him,

...a new Networked Journalism is the inevitable, or certainly the most desirable, response to this changing dynamic. As the public sphere is threatened journalism must change to sustain its core functions and value. So when we judge what is in decline and what is thriving, we must not assume it is a static object. Society is changing, so journalism must change too. Journalism is changing so society should pay attention (Ibid.).

On a structural and technical level, Pavlik has noted the Internet is in many ways “merely a product, or symptom, of a more fundamental technological change that has been underway for the past half-century and only now beginning to crystallize; the convergence of telecommunications, computing, and traditional media” (2001, p. xii). The new media system that emerges out of the combination of these individual systems caters to all forms of human communication in a digital format that renders irrelevant the old analog format (Ibid.).

Pavlik, like Levine et al. and Beckett before, has added, and correctly so, that the massive shift in the nature of journalism is neither simple nor one-dimensional, and that a confluence of other factors – economic, regulatory and cultural – comes in handy in trying to make comprehensive sense of the impact of new technologies today. Moreover, he notes, quoting American journalist Carl Bernstein, the press and journalism in all media have slipped in their performance of their traditional vital duty as information providers to the citizens of a democracy. Increasingly, “[American] journalism is disfigured by celebrity, gossip and sensationalism and journalists are moving farther away from challenging people to mindlessly amusing them, taking on a culture of titillation in which they impress upon their readers and viewers that the trivial is important” (2001, p. 23).

With particular regard to North America, some observers have criticized the wave of corporate ownership and consolidation of newspapers, which has affected the media’s duties and resulted in a growing disenchantment towards them. As John Nichols and R.W. McChesney recently noted, the Internet only “accentuated and accelerated a process” that was set in motion in the 1970s, when, as an effect of corporate ownership and consolidation of newspapers, “managers began to balance their books and to satisfy the demand from investors for ever-increasing returns by cutting journalists and shutting news bureaus” (2009). With these cuts, news organizations increasingly forfeited serious in-depth investigation that once propelled them and replaced it with sleaze, entertainment and superficiality. “Trivia is the hallmark of news today, and everything has been reduced to spin, including matters of life and death” (Nichols & McChesney, 2009; Gant, 2007).

More recent observations about American journalism note that, “The hard truth is that the press mostly amplifies the agendas of others – the prominent and powerful – and tends to aggressively assume its adversarial role only when someone or something – a president, a CEO, an institution – is wounded and vulnerable” (Cunningham, 2009, p. 32). This pandering to the prominent, the powerful and corporate demands coupled by a myriad of scandals, including plagiarism, incompetence, reporting untruths and spin and ideological leanings have battered the credibility of the mainstream media, most particularly in the West, and dented the public’s confidence in them.

Cunningham has suggested news organizations adopt a “new mission” if they want to have a chance at repairing their strained relationship with the public. This would have to entail, among others, a form or type of dissent which opposes the view that “the range of possible solutions to the nation’s problems must necessarily come from the centers of power and influence.” The media “would have to stop reflexively marginalizing ideas and voices that come from the fringes simply because no one “official” is embracing them.” Last, but not least, “News outlets would have to explain themselves and their decisions, and be clear about what they stand for and what they stand against. In short, they would need to convince the public, by words and deeds, that they are on its side” (Cunningham, 2009, p. 35).

Technology, Change and Eastern Africa Media

Media failures are not limited to the U.S. Although there is not much rigorous, in-depth research of public perceptions of the media in Uganda, there is a feeling that the media there has failed as much. As the following chapter will demonstrate, the two largest circulating newspapers – *New Vision*, where the government holds majority shares, and *Daily Monitor*, which is privately-owned – are generally perceived by the public to be biased for and against the government. Both newspapers have run a number of commentaries pointing out the biases of the other.

In addition, a study into FM radio stations has noted how they are largely more about quantity than quality. Many donor agencies and other foreign organizations have shown enormous interest in the media by designing and funding “media development and capacity building” initiatives and trainings, yet, as the report clearly indicates, not much seems to come out of these initiatives. Some of these fail to deliver any lasting results because they are concentrated on hypothetical situations rather than focusing on, for instance, the weakness of existing media structure and content, biases of news outlets or those who work there, ideological or other leanings, all of which directly impact on the news process.

With regards to the new information technologies, particularly the Internet, some observers have tempered the enthusiasm they engender in relation to, for instance, increasing citizen involvement in the collection of information, debate and action in Africa by pointing to the small number, comprising mostly the elite, who have access to it (Zuckerman, 2005). The African continent has the least numbers of Internet users in the whole world (Internet Usage Statistics, 2009).

This kind of observation, although true, misses a very critical point, which is that in reality the way power is distributed and how change happens, the elite occupy a privileged lead agent role and their access to and sharing information might become invaluable in organizing group action. Otherwise the same argument about small elite numbers can be made about newspapers. Yet, as Minabere Ibelema and Tanja Bosch have noted, whereas in general newspapers and magazines in Africa remain largely for the educated urban dwellers and “despite the much greater reach of the broadcast media, especially radio, the print media remains very influential. Even with the growth in independent broadcasting, newspapers and magazines still set the agenda of political discourse for the most part” (2009, p. 318).

As new technologies have rapidly spread globally, much of the African continent has seen some dramatic use made of Internet and mobile phones. Examples abound in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya and Uganda during these countries’ presidential elections that provide insight to the potential power of new media. The main challenge to date, even as these technologies continue to feature centrally in many news organizations’ operations and people’s lives, is the continued absence of critical in-depth studies about their real impact. This thesis attempts to contribute towards filling this gap in the scholarship about new technologies in Uganda and the East African region in general.

A safer and perhaps more plausible way to look at these technologies in the short-run, and in a way that resonates better with much of Africa’s realities, is to consider them in terms of the literal, dictionary meaning of new; something that previously did not exist in any given place. In Uganda, for instance or Africa in general, technologies such as

Frequency Modulation (FM) radio stations, mobile phones and even the Internet have only been introduced some 15 years ago.

They can also be understood as part of alternative small media, which include, but are not limited to, graffiti, flyers, underground cassettes, pirated videos, Internet listservs, fanzines, slogans, jokes and rumours. As media scholar Debra Spitulnik has observed, particularly of countries where restriction of media remains a serious challenge, which is the case with many in Africa, “small media are significant in helping people create meaningful communicative spaces for themselves” and the spaces created “can be best understood as vital and pervasive undercurrents and reservoirs of political commentary, critique and potential mobilization” (2002, p. 181).

These spaces form a “crucial part of civil society and the public sphere” because they provide an “arena where citizens and citizen-based associations discuss state authority, political accountability, and representation” (p. 179). Compared to the “linear, one-to-many model of transmission implied in the mass communication process, with small media, producers of messages are also often the consumers; receivers may act as distributors; and there may be multiple sites of (re)production and (re)distribution” (p. 181). This, in a nutshell, explains the nature of the Net.

The drawback, however, as shall be discussed later in Chapter Two, “small media are not always stable or localized in one territory – they operate in cyberspace, in virtual spaces, they sometimes extend outside of the nation, and their sources or authors are not always locatable” (p. 179). Further to this, “they are not always in direct dialogue with agents of the state. In many cases the communications produced in small media are not very visible and public and they are not explicitly formulated and followed through as if

they were part of a direct engagement with the state” (p. 178). The challenge, therefore, is to expose these communications to the centres of power as much as possible.

Beyond the Net and the Web, in much of Africa a different but related technology is having an impact on journalism, news media and life in general. It is the mobile phone. This continuously evolving and miniaturizing gadget has rapidly caught on in most underdeveloped regions of the world that lack what the ubiquity of the Internet has delivered elsewhere. Much of the literature about the mobile phone renders it in revolutionary terms. If comparisons were ever needed, it would not be incorrect to say the mobile phone is to weak economies what the Net and the Web are to stronger ones. The mobile phone is well on its course to become the “world’s first ubiquitous communications platform” and “its major path of growth is now in the global South where the mobile is not just a phone but a global address, a transaction device, and an identity marker for hundreds of millions of poor people” (West, 2008, p. 1).

In relation to the focus of this thesis, the mobile phone has more than any other technology, underwritten “the rise of a pluralized, diverse and multi-mediated public sphere, with individuals, groups, corporations, governments, and other entities freely comingling to influence public opinion.” Because of this, “the traditional media, long the gatekeepers and shapers of public opinion, are now forced to jostle in this space – substantively and financially – with millions of alternative voices” (Kalathil, 2008, p. 12).

Further to this, the mobile phone “holds unprecedented opportunity for media in developing countries to engage their core audiences more deeply, reach new audiences on the edge of their current footprint, and provide interactive and customized information services that are both profitable and life-improving” (West, 2008, p. 1). Ironically, what

is an opportunity is also a threat because “if media don’t address the mobile as a viable information platform, others will, and within the space of a few years media players will have lost a large measure of their market share, ‘mind share’, and standing in society at large” (Ibid.).

Thesis Organization

In this introductory chapter, I started off by highlighting the link between human beings and technology, clarifying the focus of the thesis, discussing the impact of technologies on communities that have adopted them first or where they are largely ubiquitous, as well as a more plausible way to understand new technologies in societies where they are yet to become ubiquitous, and the opportunities that especially mobile phones present the latter.

Chapter Two reviews the literature on new media, the term that has come to represent the internet/web-supported communication platforms. Based on two competing theoretical perspectives – that is technological determinism and social shaping of technology determinism – I examine the definition and meaning of new media and probe the validity of the classification ‘new media’ vis-à-vis the existing forms of media.

Chapter Three presents, in somewhat broad strokes, an overview of the evolution of news media in Uganda highlighting its growth and enduring challenges such as the perpetual unfriendly relations with the state. The chapter also reviews the country’s telecom and information technologies sector, highlighting changes and most recent developments that might offer ideas about how the future is shaping up to be. Both reviews are important to avoid ‘copying and pasting’ the realities of other places. It is also important because Internet/Web-supported communication platforms are neither

existing in a vacuum nor starting out from nothing. They grow out of existing media and their effect is very much dependent on the level of development of enabling infrastructure.

Chapters Four and Five contain the bulk of primary research. To effectively discuss the research's primary data, each chapter uses one extended example drawn out of interviews in which two events were continuously mentioned to illustrate the effect of new technologies on news and information in Uganda. Chapter Four uses the emergence of Radiokatwe.com at the height of the 2006 presidential elections. The website took the country by storm with its hard-hitting news and commentaries. It threatened the prospects of the incumbent president and candidate then, Yoweri Museveni, forcing him to order it blocked. Today, as some have observed, it stands not only as a stark example of "how Uganda, like many parts of the world, has been changed by the advent on the new information technologies" but also it "exists mostly as testament to how much technology has undermined the ability of the Museveni structures (or any such like it) to control the terms of gossip, news, political debate and speculation" (Onyango-Obbo, 2007). While Chapter Five uses a text messaging campaign against the giveaway of part of Mabira Natural Forest Reserve to a sugar manufacturing company. This campaign demonstrated the power of mobile phones in organizing and raising citizen consciousness and support around major issues. Like the website, it too illustrates the promises and challenges of mobile phones in Uganda.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis by looking at the future. Some of the issues to consider include; with the promises of better connectivity enabled by fibre optic cable connections that will soon be fully operational, what does this mean for Uganda's

journalism in the long run? In the absence of better access, are there ways to work out partnerships with radio stations with higher listenership to optimally utilize the current levels of access? As the media landscape evolves, are news media in Uganda better off revising how they conceive themselves and become more than a conduit of information or a platform of debate into something more like information repositories and providers?

Methodology

The research was conducted in Kampala, Uganda's capital, because like many other countries in Africa, the capital city and a few other bustling urban centres have the best Internet connectivity and usage, the most concentration of radio stations, and the highest concentration and usage of mobile phones.

Research was mainly conducted using semi-structured and unstructured interviews and direct observations. There were also a number of informal group discussions, mainly with reporters, but the research privileged the people in management positions who were selected for direct, face-to-face interviews. The outcomes of these group discussions have been integrated in the discussion together with my own observations. I have also drawn from my experiences working as a journalist in Uganda and heavily relying on both the Internet and the mobile phone for all my reporting. All the primary findings are presented in Chapters Four to Six.

I chose to use interviewing as the main research method primarily because there has not been much of any in-depth scholarly reflection on the impact of new technologies on news media in Uganda. Interviews enabled me to stimulate reflection and interpretations about these new tools, which like the traditional pen, notebook and

recorder, have become very basic accessories to the Ugandan journalist in the 21st century. Indeed, in addition to their knowledge, interviews helped me get the people I interviewed to think more critically and in a contextual way about the real impact of new technologies in Uganda rather than to extrapolate for experiences of other places. No other method could have done better.

In addition, interviewing catered well to the financial constraints of the thesis. The lack of sufficient funds made it difficult to conduct a much more rigorous research, for example, to establish what kind of people were reading newspapers online, how long they spent reading them, whether they preferred the paper online and not the one in print or whether they read both, what their experience reading the paper online vis-à-vis in print was, what changes to journalism could they attribute to the Internet, and what their thoughts were about the future.

While an online survey would have looked after much of the financial constraints, Internet use in Uganda is still unreliable, which lessens both the chance and the number of people willing to respond to an online survey. A few people who have done research on Internet use and access in Uganda have had to rely on either a guided or self-administered questionnaire as well as interviews.

For this research, I interviewed managing editors from four major print publications: *New Vision*, which is the largest circulating newspaper and where the government holds majority shares; *Daily Monitor*, the second-largest circulating and privately-owned newspaper; *Observer* and *Independent*, a bi-weekly and weekly publication respectively. Two other major publications – *Red Pepper* and *Bukedde* – were left out because as tabloids they do not subscribe to the same codes and expectations as the

other publications. The thesis considered print media because it is the most well developed, and websites of these publications are among the top list of the most visited websites in Uganda. Besides, print media remain the worst affected by the rise of the Internet and the new media platforms that it enables.

Managing editors were selected because they make decisions and I was seeking to know the changes the Internet had forced on these companies and in what ways they were responding to them. Where they were unavailable, say at *New Vision* and *Observer* for example, they delegated equally competent representatives about the subject of the interviews. The *New Vision*'s web manager, for instance, who stood in for the deputy editor-in-chief, set up the web department and is now playing a leading role in the changes the company is undergoing on account of the Internet.

I also interviewed the former online editor of *Daily Monitor*, now in the same position at the East African Community (a regional economic bloc which brings together all the five East African countries), who oversaw some of the newspaper's online initiatives like the e-paper and a mobile phone news application. I interviewed a former managing editor of *Daily Monitor* and now a media trainer and consultant who, through his weekly column and radio commentaries, is keenly interested in changes journalism is undergoing on account of new technologies.

Other interviews involved the business development editor and columnist for the *Observer*, who too has demonstrated a keen interest in new technologies through his commentaries; a former training editor of the Nation Media Group (*Daily Monitor*'s parent company) and who did a now well-regarded Ph.D. study on political talk shows on Ugandan radio; a well-noted researcher and now editor of an online-only publication; and

a former reporter and now researcher in information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Furthermore, other interviews included two academics, and heads of mass communication departments, one from Makerere University, Uganda's premier university, and another from Uganda Christian University, one of the highly regarded private universities in the country; the national director and the editor-in-chief of Uganda Radio Network, a news agency supplying over 40 radio stations across the country. This agency relies on the Internet and mobile phones for its entire operations. Its editor-in-chief is also among the popular bloggers in Uganda.

In total, I had face-to-face in-depth and largely semi-structured interviews with sixteen people. While I cannot rule out the possibility that I might have left out key resourceful individuals, it is important to note that with this number I reached a reliable saturation point insofar as the people I identified to interview are concerned. That is, I was able to interview all managing editors, or their representatives, of all the publications identified for study, web administrators or online editors, persons with knowledge of ICTs, and those keenly interested in the intersection between ICTs and news media and journalism. I was left with no doubt that their knowledge, insights and responses were very reliable for this study.

In addition to all these people, each five most regular callers into ten of the most popular radio stations in Kampala were identified and a short guided questionnaire administered to each one of them in an attempt to capture, even if vaguely, the profile of the person who engages radio stations through mobile phones. By looking at who actually uses mobile phones to share information or opinion can provide a better idea of the

impact of mobile phones in enhancing citizen participation. Is the mobile phone bringing into debate any new voices that reporters are unlikely to seek out or are these gizmos propelling already familiar voices such as those of newsmakers and opinion leaders?

Radio, particularly FM, and mobile phones have evolved alongside each other, having been liberalized a year apart in the early 1990s. As such, they have become so intertwined that in as far as news and information in Uganda is concerned there is no way one can be discussed separate from another. Moreover, all radio stations, as reflected in their programming, and as earlier noted, are shifting towards more interactivity. As already noted, people who call into radio stations raise their expectations and build up a consciousness through which they view the exercise as a right or entitlement to use their gadgets any way they want. This thesis probes the claims that mobile phones have empowered and reinforced people's ability to express themselves. It also, albeit to a lesser extent, also probes the consequent claim that radio stations have responded to this by introducing more interactivity in their programming to engage their audiences in more in-depth ways.

Significance of Study

This thesis hopes to add to the small but growing body of literature in Eastern Africa, and indeed the wider Africa, examining the use and impact of new information technologies at their current levels of access and penetration. For Uganda in particular, a study of this nature is long overdue because the Internet and the Web have been an integral part of the news media since 1994 when then *Monitor* newspaper – now Daily Monitor – became one of the first newspapers on the African continent to go online.

The Eastern Africa coastline has hitherto been the only longest coastline in the world unconnected to the information superhighway by fibre optic cables (Odiambo, 2009). With connection to the Web limited to satellite connections, access to the Internet has remained very costly and as a result slowed penetration. But this is changing. The planned arrival of three undersea fibre optic cables and their promise to significantly reduce costs, increase access and a higher online culture all mean that one can bet on the future to look very different from now. Given that the impact of the Internet on journalism appear to be unstoppable, and given that this is still an emerging area of study, even in more developed countries than Uganda, another hope of this thesis is that it can emerge as a sufficient exploratory study of the current trends on which future studies in this area can base to enrich their perspectives.

Interest in studying this area is further born of the fact that as a continent, Africa has been beset with being more adopters than creators or inventors, from fashions to lifestyles, from ideology to technologies. But as one respondent noted, “the Internet has brought with it everything that Uganda and other so-called Third world countries could only dream of: the first instance of a truly level playing field” (Uganda Record, 2009). Even if these technologies are yet to have the same impact as they have already had in more advanced economies where they are ubiquitous, whatever ‘little’ impact they have so far had in Uganda is worth studying and documenting.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORIZING TECHNOLOGY, CHANGE AND NEW MEDIA

Central to the highflying commentary that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are having effects of a revolutionary proportion are two critical queries: do technologies underwrite change or do they merely facilitate it? And, are new inventions a complete break from all existing or previous ones or are they in some way improvements, in which case their 'newness' lies only in their unique features? How one answers these queries determines their overall perception of technologies in general.

But these queries are not new. They are the spine in an old debate that pits technological determinism against social determinism, which this chapter attempts to explore so as to properly understand and ground the changes we associate with ICTs whether generally or with specific reference to Uganda. The chapter will also examine the definition and salient features of 'new media', as well as the relationship between new media and democracy. Finally it will focus on new media and democracy insofar as it relates to Africa as part of the 'global South', the widely used and politically correct term to refer to the world's so-called underdeveloped regions.

As the discussion below will reveal, it is widely accepted that generally societies and their people invent technologies to match some predetermined purposes even as they continuously come up with new uses. The central characteristic of technologies is a continuous hybridization, as the latest build upon pre-existing ones, because, "even technologies that are perceived as being unprecedented are found, upon closer analysis, to have been designed, built and implemented around existing technologies and practices" (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006, p. 8).

Whatever we label as new media does not acquire its properties unless it is compared either with what already exists or what has gone before it. As Lister et al. have noted,

As a new medium becomes socially available it is necessarily placed in relation to a culture's old media forms and the way that these are already valued and understood. This is seen in expression of a sense of anxiety at the loss of the forms that are displaced...

Conversely, during the period in which the cultural reception of a new medium is being worked out, it is also favourably positioned in relation to existing media. The euphoric celebration of a new medium and the often feverish speculation about its potential is achieved, at least in part, by its favourable contrast with older forms (2003, pp. 60-61).

Much of the multidisciplinary scholarship about technology in general, and new media in particular, draws from experiences of more advanced economies that have been exposed longest and in turn been positively affected the most by technologies in question as well as other social, economic and political developments that have either preceded or come alongside technological advancements. Coincidentally, most of these are located in the 'global North' although some East Asian countries that have experienced rapid economic growth in recent times are categorized here too.

On the other hand, in much of the 'global South', the general absence in some areas and the extremely slow adoption in others of similar technologies have resulted in, among other reasons, the region lagging behind economically, being a dumping ground for old technologies and resulting in a disinterest in looking critically at the effects of technology in general beyond the presumed digital or technological divide between the North and South.

Technology, the Old Debate

The term new media, sometimes interchanged with digital or online media, has gained widespread currency over a relatively short period of time as representing the kinds of communications and ways in which information is disseminated that are made possible by the Internet, the web, and mobile phones. But how exactly or to what extent these can be said to be new has reignited an otherwise seemingly settled theoretical contest about technology and change in general.

The contest exists in the first place primarily because of the presumptions we make about new technologies, or new things in general, being automatically better than what they are replacing, and the future we conjure up based upon the promises we read into new technologies in this case. Thus, whatever is classified as ‘new media’ as it were “appear with claims and hopes attached; they will deliver increased productivity, educational opportunity, and open up new creative and communicative horizons” (Lister et al. 2003, p. 11). The term has been used before over the latest form of mass communication a society has developed. In the past it represented radio, television, cable TV, and satellite TV. Today, it is primarily used in reference to emerging digital/electronic communication forms, particularly the Internet and the World Wide Web (Ludlow, 2007, p. 5).

The central thesis for scholars, roundly labelled as technology determinists, who believe technology precedes and therefore underwrites change, is, as their classical opponent Raymond Williams has noted,

New technologies are discovered, by an essentially internal process of research and development, which then sets the conditions of social change and progress. Progress, in particular, is the history of these inventions, which 'created the modern world'. The effects of these technologies, whether direct or indirect, foreseen or unforeseen, are as it were the rest of history (2000, p. 38).

There is less, if any, interest among those who espouse this view how the new became new. Instead, they are more focused on effects or what lies in the works for the future. They show no regard for the histories of inventions. Yet those like Williams, who are less deterministic and who oppose this view, argue how, "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" (Williams, 1974, pp. 132, 133).

Perhaps nobody has written emphatically to clarify and defend technological determinism better than media theorist Marshall McLuhan, an avowed technology determinist himself. In the way he sees it, any medium possesses characteristics unique to itself. These characteristics in turn not only affect the environment the medium operates in but also affect us and how we understand the content the medium carries. In quite unequivocal terms, McLuhan emphatically declared how "the medium is the message", explaining how "the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (1964, p. 7).

McLuhan, who perceived 'medium' in its broadest sense, draws on examples of automation and the electric light and notes of automation that, "Many people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was

its meaning or message.” Yet, “In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs” (pp. 7-8). About electric light he has noted that, “Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference.”

Whatever use light is put to “merely underlines the point that “the medium is the message” because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association” (pp. 8-9).

McLuhan’s point essentially is: If there is no uniformity to how a technology or medium is used, or how we respond to content that is derived from it, as indeed he has noted that “the contents or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association” (p. 9), how then are we to disregard the agency or primacy of the technologies or media in question? For him then, technologies are separate from their uses. They are neither insignificant nor subordinate to the myriad uses human beings employ them to. As he has noted more eloquently,

Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of a technological idiot...The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as “content.” The content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera. The effect of the movie form is not related to its program content. The “content” of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or of speech (p. 18).

As already noted, Williams, whom some regard as having “provided some of the master templates for what has become mainstream media studies” (Lister et al. 2003, p. 73) has opposed this McLuhanite thinking by noting that technologies “become available as an element or a medium in a process of change that is in any case occurring or about to

occur” (Williams, 2000, p. 38). For that reason, “Any particular technology is then as it were a by-product of a social process that is otherwise determined. It only acquires effective status when it is used for purposes which are already contained in this known social process” (Ibid.).

He has added that, “A technology, when it has been achieved, can be seen as a general human property, an extension of general human capacity. But all technologies have been developed and improved to help with known human practices or with foreseen and desired practices” (1974, p. 132). For Williams then, technologies are inextricable from their uses and contents many, if not all, of which are inspired by “human intention and agency, and arise to specifically answer desires and interests within social groups, which are historically and culturally specific” (p. 133).

Some like-minded scholars have added that, “Technology on its own is incapable of producing change, the view being that, whatever is going on around us in terms of rapid technological change, there are rational and manipulative interests at work driving the technology in particular directions” (Lister et al. 2003, p.74). While others have noted too that, “New media technologies both shape, and are shaped by, their social, economic and cultural contexts. More specifically for new media, however, such shaping is *recombinant*. That is, new media systems are products of continuous hybridization of both existing technologies and innovations in interconnected technical and institutional networks” (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002, p. 8).

Additionally, contrary to the well-oiled narrative that increasing efficiency is the sole reason human institutions, human skill and creativity are assembled together to produce new technologies, “The history of technologies tells us that technological change

expresses a panoply of human motives, not the least of which is the desire of some to have dominion over others” (Winner, 1999, p. 31). Winner has added that the things we call ‘technologies’ are ways of building order in our world. Because as human beings we are obsessed with order, those in position of especially political and economic power determine the nature and structure of technologies in much the same way they do with the law or politics, all of which usually have long-lasting impacts (Ibid.). As Lievrouw and Livingstone have noted more eloquently,

While ICTs are influenced by existing technological context, and may have unintended consequences, to a great extent they are the result of human actions and decisions. They are not determined by an independent, inevitable causality or evolutionary process unique to technology itself; rather, designers, users, regulators and others...to achieve their particular goals and purposes (2002, p. 8).

This observation is more marked in places like Uganda where most of the technologies currently existing have been transferred rather than invented there. These technologies arrive here primarily as a function of economic investment, their main aim being to amass wealth for those who own these investments. The ways in which they operate as well as their purposes are, in a number of cases, usually predetermined. As a result, these communities, in which technologies are transferred, are deprived the opportunity available to those in which they are invented to weave and integrate them into cultural and context specific realities. These communities then have to attune their socio-cultural specific realities to the technologies, or have the technologies fit into their realities, a process that can sometimes be very slow, or in other cases ends up in failure.

To be sure, there are exceptions, the mobile phone being the oft-cited example. Although unique uses have been found such as transferring money using them, an

application that is prevalent in Eastern Africa, this still reinforces the observation earlier made by Winner and other scholars. The primary motive of this application is to give telecom companies a competitive edge and to increase their revenues. Otherwise, telecoms in Uganda, for example, have repeatedly refused to reduce tariffs across networks to make calling more affordable to reflect the country's economic realities even when there have been many requests and demands to that effect.

New Media: Definition(s) and Features

New media do not exist in a “vacuum and, as media, would have no resources to draw upon if they were not in touch and negotiating with the long traditions of the process, purpose, and signification that older media of communication, representation, and expression possess” (Lister et al. 2003, p. 40). Other scholars who question the newness of new technologies have noted how “for a medium to be significantly new it has to make a radical break with the past” (p. 54), which has yet to happen especially with digital/electronic communication forms, today's representatives of new media. As David J. Bolter and Richard A. Grusin have noted, “What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer to the challenges of new media” (1999, p. 15). This highlights the point about hybridization earlier noted where two or older media join together or an old one assumes a new context and new possibilities which, in some ways, transforms it.

Scholars who have attempted to define new media have framed their definitions “in terms of system features and services, industry structures and ownership, or the

psychology of media users” as well as, “new media content and its forms” (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002, p. 5). New media are seen as: Information and communication technologies and their associated social contexts, incorporating; the artefacts or devices that enable and extend our abilities to communicate; The communication activities or practices we engage in to develop and use these devices; and The social arrangements or organizations that form around the devices and practices (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002, p. 8). According to Lister et al., new media are “those methods and social practices of communication, representation, and expression that have developed using the digital, multimedia, networked computer and the ways that this machine is held to have transformed work in other media” (2003, p. 2).

At the centre of these definitions is the aspect of interactivity, which is perhaps the most salient feature of new media. Explained simply, interactivity is the ability for users to manipulate content in very many different ways, including producing and sharing their own. More than any other feature, interactivity gives the Internet, the Web and the mobile phone their identity as new media. It offers a different view of looking at new media, which is represents the users’ experiences, which include new experiences with texts, new patterns of consuming media, new ways of representing the world, and immersive virtual environments (Lister et al., 2003). Moreover, it is around interactivity and particularly such user experiences, that theorizing about the democratic potential of new technologies is built. The difference between these new media platforms and traditional communications forms “is the degree to which they offer political discussion opportunities that attract public officials, candidates, citizens, and even members of the mainstream press corps” (Davis & Owen, 1998, p. 8).

Like new media, interactivity can be plagued with definitional problems as well as long and convoluted interpretations. Yet, ideologically, it “stands for a more powerful sense of user engagement with media texts, a more independent relation to sources of knowledge, individualized media use and greater user choice” (Lister et al. 2003, p. 20). It turns the public that hitherto were merely spectators into actors, consuming and producing content in the realm of media politics. And just as with ideological connotations of newness, we perceive interactivity as more than actively engaging us because of its implied reciprocity and automatically regard it as better than passivity.

But some scholars argue, and rightly so perhaps, that interactivity feeds an illusion of a kind of democracy in which there is shared power between the creator of content and its viewers who can manipulate it in any way they want when in reality no such thing exists because “actually the artist has planned every option that can happen” (Penny, 1996, p. 64). That, however, does not in any way invalidate the value of interactivity as it is balanced out by the ability of the user to create his or her content and does not necessarily have to rely on what is presented. This is the point that, as the introductory chapter of this thesis revealed, scholars such as Rosen, Welch, Gillmor and Beckett make in acknowledgement of the potentials of new media platforms. Later in this thesis (see Chapters Four and Five), we shall see how this interactive aspect of new media bolsters free expression and enhances the democratic process in Uganda.

New Media and Democracy

The role of the media in a vibrant democracy has been firmly determined: it is the conduit for timely and accurate information for the sustenance of an otherwise uneasy relationship between those in the majority who vote to be represented and a minority band of governing elites who make up the representatives.

The use and reference to democracy in this study is limited to a people's ability to fully participate in it by making their views and opinions heard. Certainly, democracy as a concept remains highly controversial and without any definitive consensus even if the dominance of its liberal form might suggest so. In Uganda, for example, the application of this liberal democracy remains very shaky, mainly because of its incompatibility with the country's socio-cultural and political history from which present realities emerge. Moreover, the effectiveness of this liberal form of democracy continues to come under intense criticism even in the U.S., which more than any other country among those deemed to be highly democratic in the world, advocates its adoption elsewhere, especially in countries that are perceived as underdeveloped and poorly governed.

As such, any discussion involving democracy, which unfortunately is beyond the scope of this thesis, must be preceded by a thorough discussion about democracy itself: what it is; what type suits what context; and, for whom should it benefit and how. This is now even more so in face of "unparalleled excitement" surrounding digital media and the hopes that it "can provide fuller, more meaningful participation in national civic life" and

that, “democracy itself can be made better through digital media” (Wilson III, 2008).

After all, as some scholars have noted,

...in terms of a rigorous establishment of the democratizing effects of the Internet, the jury is still out and there are a number of reasons why this is so. For one, the sheer quantity of potential variables involved complicates everything. Government regime type, degree of Internet diffusion, and social roles of the Internet are just a few of the variables that may play a role in how the Internet affects democracy. Furthermore, the definition and measurement of many of these variables can be contentious. For instance, the boundaries of the term “democracy”, and how it is measured, are subject to lively debate (Best & Wade, 2005).

That said, and as Stephen Coleman has noted, for purposes of acting responsively, representatives need “to know what citizens are thinking and experiencing” while citizens on their part are only able to arrive at public judgments, if they “know what their representatives are doing and how it affects them” (1999, p. 67). Therefore, in order to allow “for autonomous action to arise there must exist channels of communications providing for a free flow of information both amongst citizens and between representatives and voters” (Ibid.).

This relationship, as part of the introductory chapter revealed, has been deeply botched primarily by the choices news media have made: accepting to be disfigured by triviality and acquiescing with prominent, powerful, corporate and political agendas, all the while sacrificing democratic channels of communication. Generally in North America, this has not been helped by the increased “concentration, conglomeration and hyper-commercialism” of news media in a few corporate hands, which has resulted into “the decline, if not elimination, of notions of public service in our media culture” (McChesney, 1999, p. 2).

Unfortunately, a similar wave is sweeping across Eastern Africa. For instance, the Nation Media Group, which is the largest in the region, is mostly buying out news outlets and bringing them under a uniform editorial policy. While the New Vision Group, which is the largest media group in Uganda, is both buying out and establishing new outlets across the country even as it gears itself to expanding into the whole region.

Some scholars feel journalism has been degraded “to the point where it is not a democratic force” and the media system has been overrun by “powerful interests” who have “constructed it so that citizens will not be involved in the key policy decisions that have shaped it” (McChesney, 1999, p. 16). As a result, the media is “regarded by increasing members of the electorate as sterile and irrelevant; and the disjunction between ‘news’ about representatives and deliberation amongst the represented have resulted in an atrophied political culture” (Coleman, 1999, p. 67).

Some of these sentiments are true for advanced democracies as they are for struggling democracies, which face a whole host of other challenges. For instance, in Uganda in particular, the *New Vision*, which is the largest circulating newspaper and where the government owns majority shares, is generally perceived as biased towards the government and as such cannot publish any article critical of those who hold power. *Daily Monitor* on the other hand, which is the second largest circulating paper and is privately-owned, is generally perceived (a perception the current government made its mission and gone to great lengths to promote, as Chapter Three will reveal) as being anti-government and as such is never fair and balanced. Needless to say, both perceptions are wrong.

In other challenges, a study assessing the performance of FM radio stations noted the quality of programming was poor, the stations lacked editorial independence, were highly interfered with both by their proprietors and politicians, and their levels of professionalism were questionable. In short, they were more about quantity than quality (Kibazo & Kanabi, 2007).

This public disenchantment with the news media, particularly in North America and Europe regarding bringing about an atrophied political culture, has led a number of scholars like Davis and Owen, Erik Bucy and Kimberly Gregson, Lawrence Grossman, Lewis Friedland, and Mark Poster to conceive of new media as bringing the much-needed new energy into the democratic process, reconnecting citizens to the political system and *each other and empowering them to become actors rather than merely spectators actively engaging the political process*. New media is seen by these and many other like-minded scholars also as potentially reconstituting the public sphere and creating even more space for political competition and civic participation.

The unprecedented possibilities for average citizens to deliberate public policy and contribute to decision-making processes, both of which have been up until now the exclusivity of political representatives and their handlers, defines new media as “paradigmatically distinct and potentially empowering” (Coleman, 1999, p. 69). In addition, as these technologies have emerged, they have stirred “hopes for the revival of a public sphere of unmediated discourse” because of their capacity to “expand communicative interaction beyond that afforded by any hitherto existing monological media system means that it could have a far greater effect upon democratic political process than the emergence of television” (Ibid.).

In Uganda's context, and indeed all other places like it, whereas new media have not yet reached a critical mass from which Coleman makes the above observation, they are, as this thesis will demonstrate in the following chapters, already playing a vital role as a refuge against the state's intolerance of free speech and criticism. New media make it difficult for the government to completely censor or shut down critical news outlets.

The Revived Public Sphere

Mark Poster has noted that, "The issue of the public sphere is at the heart of any reconceptualisation of democracy" (2001, p. 263). The public sphere was for a long time conceived as, "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" through rational public discourse and debate and where "public opinion can by definition only come into existence when a reasoning public is presupposed" (Habermas, 1974, p. 50).

This way of conceiving the public sphere, however, has been criticized by poststructuralists who have questioned "the emancipatory potentials of its model of consensus through rational debate" (Poster 2001, p.264); by the feminists for its "gender blindness" while others are disconcerted by "its patriarchal, bourgeois and logocentric attachments" embedded in its assumptions such as that of a reasoning public (Ibid.). They argue that the oppressed and excluded individuals, who are mostly workers who own neither capital nor means of production, form oppositional or counter public spheres that Habermas' position does not cater for (Ibid.).

What is more, many of the places that Habermas alluded to – from the agora, coffee houses, taverns, public squares, street corners, town halls, the church, to the union

hall among others – in which citizens assembled to freely deliberate about matters of general interest and form public opinion still exist but they “no longer serve as organizing centers for political discussion and action” because “contemporary social relations seem to be devoid of a basic level of interactive practice which, in the past, was the matrix of democratizing politics” (Poster 2001, p. 263).

These realms have been long replaced with news media as Habermas himself acknowledged that, “newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere.” They assumed this role by transforming “from mere institutions for the publication of news into bearers and leaders of public opinion” (1974, p. 53). This view has been reinforced in more recent works. For instance, whatever we call the public domain is nothing more than a figment of our own imaginations. As John Hartley explains it,

The public domain has not, since classical city states, existed as a place you can literally enter, while the public in its entirety has never met at all, for even in classical times those who gathered in the agora or forum to legislate and adjudicate their own and each other’s affairs in the name of democracy were a small, unrepresentative minority of people of the city states so governed, well outnumbered by slaves, women and so on (1992, p. 1).

In the modern Western state, the terms have even all but disappeared from most people’s daily vocabulary. Even in Uganda, what is common in contemporary communication and public debate is the idea of ‘public opinion’, which itself, as Walter Lipmann wrote many decades ago, is fraught with a lot of irreconcilable complexities (1922).

Hartley has added that while they have never tangibly existed, “The public realm and the public are still to be found, large as life, in media. Television, popular

newspapers, magazines and photography, the popular media of the modern period, are the public domain, the place where and the means by which the public is created and has its being” (1992, p. 1).

Yet even this is not entirely true. In general, news media have always been criticized for being unrepresentative of all classes for people and of advancing particular agendas, even more so now in the age of media concentration. As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky have noted,

...the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them. The representatives of these interests have important agendas and principles that they want to advance, and they are well positioned to shape and constrain media policy...the same underlying power sources that own the media and fund them as advertisers, that serve as primary definers of news, and that produce flak and proper-thinking experts, also play a key role in fixing basic principles and the dominant ideologies (2002, p. xi).

The disenchantment with the traditional, mainstream sources of news has emerged as a strong reason to explain the growing migration of news consumers to new media platforms, which in turn has attracted interest in examining the democratic potential for new media. Uganda, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Four, is undergoing this same process, but mainly because of financial reasons. That is, it is cheaper to read newspapers online for those who can access the Internet since they can be accessed at no extra cost.

New Media; Utopia vs. Dystopia

Theorizing about new media is divided along “utopian and dystopian” axes. As one observer has noted, “The utopian rhetoric habitually extols the democratizing potential of media that are new” (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 231). The dystopian rhetoric conversely cautions against such enthusiasm by underlining the limitations in reach of a “medium that currently operates on a 17 percent global penetration rate” (Ibid.).

The dystopian view, however, sobering as it is, is weakened by its underlying assumptions about traditional media having a deeper penetration. While that might be true for radio, and only in terms of access, newspapers which are in many ways more influential, have been controlled by small elites in much the same way that new media are already being faulted for benefiting the “more affluent, educated, already-articulate connected minority at the cost of even greater relative estrangement from communicative power of the poorer, less skilled, less confident unconnected majority” (Coleman, 1999, p. 69). So, just as newspapers have been influential even when controlled by a small minority elite class, the same can be said of new media.

A more accurate and cautious approach to take is one which helps us appreciate that while “technological interactivity does not deterministically produce democratic interaction” there are things it does, including enabling citizens interested in engaging the government to do so “in ways that can achieve greater public participation and unmediated publicity than were available hitherto” (Coleman, 1999, p. 70). The ability for this to happen, which is the case within the new media context, makes it possible for “for communities to connect within and between themselves” (p. 70). And in parts of the world such as Uganda, which are politically restrictive, it provides “the subversive

service of free expression under conditions of authoritarian control of the means of communication” (p. 73).

Moreover, there is another weakness in scholarship that appears too critical and dismissive of new media. It tends to apply old frameworks and perpetuating concepts such as the public, public domain, public sphere in its approach to new phenomena. Some claim the Internet is bad for democracy even as they acknowledge these concepts have never existed, “except as an ideal, a goal or an inspiration” (Noam, 2005, p. 58). Those who go in search of these concepts in new media are attracted by the potential of its infrastructure – unlimited and unregulated discourse open to virtually anybody and which knows almost no boundaries whatsoever – which tends to suggest an emergence in reality of a long held ideal or imagination of a public sphere. Yet these “romanticized retrospectives,” as Papacharissi calls them, “of past and future civic engagement often impose a language and expectations that curtail the true potential of technologies at present” (Papacharissi, 2009, pp. 243-244).

As it is, Papacharissi underlines the importance of applying models that “emphasize the plurality enabled by digital media”, “contemporary citizen needs and wants” and “the ability of the internet to amplify political processes” if we are to make more realistic assessments of the potential of new media. For instance, we will have to proceed from the view, as the discussion in this chapter and the experiences of advanced economies and even Uganda have shown, of the “public sphere as a metaphor that suggests a mode and ideal for civic participation and interaction” where “online media, including the Internet, could host a virtual sphere or revitalize the public sphere” (p. 234).

We will also have to appreciate that “online media serve as political discussion forums, encourage deliberative or direct models of democracy, and ultimately revive civic participation in public affairs.” As most scholarly research about the Internet as a public sphere seems to indicate, “online digital technologies create a public space, but do not inevitably enable a public sphere” (Ibid.). In light of that, therefore, it might serve us well to avoid restricting ourselves to the Habermasian prescriptions and instead concentrate on the trends that emerge as people become more familiar and comfortable with online media and assign new uses to them that have resonance with their current, specific and contemporary public impulses and desires. The limitations of transferred technologies notwithstanding, Chapters Four and Five demonstrate briefly how this is happening in Uganda.

New Media, Democracy and the South

Whereas there is already established thinking about how new technologies might affect democracy in general, as the preceding discussion has noted, because of a prevalent dearth of information, “these theories have excluded the experience of Sub-Saharan Africa [in which Uganda, the focus of this thesis, is situated], where meaningful access to digital tools is only beginning to emerge, but where the struggles between failed states and functioning democracy are profound” (Rotich & Goldstein, 2008, p. 2).

In this struggle between democracy and political repression, some have claimed that digital technologies might not matter because they “have simply not been around long enough in Africa” (p. 3). Yet it might actually be that their impact has not been thoroughly studied and documented and, as such, the effect of galvanizing their potential

among those who have access to them remains unexploited. This thesis intends to add to the small body of existing scholarship on this subject. A lot of interest, as the introductory chapter of this thesis noted, has focused on the digital divide between the North and the South about which a significant bulk of scholarship exists. This interest has not even extended to examine the divide existing within national borders of the countries in the South.

Where sub-Saharan Africa has been lucky to feature in discussions about new media, it has mostly been mentioned in passing and more often than not banded together as if it were a homogenous entity. This, unsurprisingly, is usually the case whenever the African continent in general is discussed. Alternatively, there is a tendency to cite the experiences of one country and extrapolate them for the whole continent. As a result new media in this part of the world is increasingly being associated with a single event: crisis. The current case about Zimbabwe is instructive in this regard.

During the country's political turmoil in 2008, when the state shut down all media houses but its own, new media technologies became the lifeline for Zimbabwean journalists and those fighting for change in the country "to continue to tell the story of the dramatic collapse of their country" (Nyaira, 2009, p. 12). Yet as foreign media such as the BBC and CNN that have a stronger presence in Africa, and which blatantly propagandized on behalf of their countries in the way they covered the conflict, reported it, they succeeded in associating the wonders of new media only with crises as if to suggest new media in Africa has no use where there is no conflict. A more cautious and fair assessment, as this thesis will demonstrate, is that crises only tend to amplify the importance of new media. They are not the only instance where they are useful.

While it is indisputable individual countries in sub-Saharan Africa have suffered more or less the same economic and political misfortunes and share somewhat similar socio-cultural practices, it is totally incorrect to draw any homogenous conclusions about the region. This generalization and consequent negative representation in foreign media clouds an accurate comprehension of Africa and has serious multiple consequences including, “serious implications of Africa’s participation in the newly emerging global arena”, “discouraging foreign investment needed for economic growth, undermining respect and self-worth for Africans, and promoting confusion on the African continent about the role of African culture in political solutions” (Ogundimu, 2002, pp. 230-231).

News media in both Uganda and Africa, as the following chapter will reveal, have developed in a different context as a product of both political and economic reforms. They have been met with different sets of challenges which have undermined their contribution to democratic reform. In the absence of theorizing about new media specific to realities in sub-Saharan Africa, “The advent of these interactive media forms on the continent still poses largely the same theoretical questions as those posed by the emergence of the new media in the west” (Mwesige 2004, p. 33).

The potential of new technologies to impact on democratic governance, as Michael Leslie has noted, “Is usually seen as lying in its ability to make citizens more conscious of what is going on in the political arena, thus helping them to become empowered. It also expands the communications horizon of citizens by enabling them to seek information from sources otherwise not available” (2002, p. 124). This happens much faster than with previous ‘old’ media but is only possible for people who are

already organized and pursuing deliberate strategies and also have access to these new media.

Yet, because there is still a lack of in-depth studies about these new media technologies in the whole of Africa, we need to resist a serious temptation to qualify their potentials as actualities. We cannot clearly determine what those who have access to them are using them for. But even more worrying is how these technologies will reach those without access yet. There are political and economic factors to consider because, as Leslie has added,

Technologies are not politically neutral and they tend to have differentiating effects. History tells us that those already powerful have an edge over others. Control of information is a source of power and where resources are scarce and the access for ordinary people can be limited by political means, the democratizing effects of the electronic media can be severely constrained (2002, p. 109).

This is true of Uganda, and indeed most, if not all, of sub-Saharan African countries where it is actually not so much a lack of resources as it is a choice of wrong priorities by their governments. In these countries, the highest priority is for those in control of the state to maintain a grip on power. One way they have found to do so is to tightly control information and the channels for disseminating it. They also impose debilitating measures on any one who attempts to challenge this state of affairs. In most of these countries, for instance Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, there are restrictions to political activities, free speech, free media and the press. Harassment of all sorts directed towards independent journalism is prevalent.

The more realistic way by far to think about these new technologies in relation to sub-Saharan Africa is to approach new media within the frameworks of alternative or

small media which include graffiti, flyers, underground cassettes, Internet litservs, online forums, blogs, slogans, jokes, and rumours. Small media are “powerful means of establishing communicative space in repressive media environments and also function more generally as expressive devices in the formation of group identity and community or subcultural solidarity” (Spitulnik, 2002, p. 177). These are invaluable ways in which marginalized groups and individuals “establish alternative spheres of communication means,” and how they “gain access to channels of communication and how they engage the state in various discourses that are pertinent to the ideas, messages, and purposes for which such marginalized groups represent” (2002, pp. 181, 184).

Small media assume their vital roles because, “in repressive media environments, state media, for the most part, inhibit rather than foster any kind of bourgeois public sphere” (Spitulnik, 2002, p. 185). In regard to online platforms, the increasingly inexpensive Internet “has enabled a dramatic proliferation of completely new ways of communicating, networking, forming community, and maintaining diasporic identities” Therefore, “in societies that are undergoing political transition” such as those to be found in sub-Saharan Africa, “access to alternative media online becomes important” (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 240). Others note how “online media complement traditional media to foster political discussion and civic messaging. These two forms of political expression, in turn, influence civic participation” (Shah, William P. Eveland, & Kwak, 2005, p. 531). This complementary role is true of fledgling economies as it is of the more advanced ones.

Their significant potential notwithstanding, small media are fraught with an inherent inability to directly engage agents of the state. “In many cases the

communications produced in small media are not very visible and public, and they are not explicitly formulated and followed through as if they were part of a direct engagement with the state” (Spitulnik, 2002, p. 178).

Online forums and expressions, for instance, have tended to be overly narcissistic in nature and those who criticize them claim they are highly opinionated and pass on a lot of misinformation and distortions. They are characterized by “squabbling and uncivil political discourse instead of thoughtful debate and meaningful dialogue”, dabble a lot in trivialities that weaken instead of strengthening democratic deliberation, and generally “create an illusion of participation and influence” (Mwesige, 2004, p. 35).

Yet, as some have argued, the critics of online forums “ignore the interpretive strategies that audiences bring to mediated texts,” and how the so-called narcissism prevalent online is “a democratizing effect” because, “The subjective focus of blogs and similar forums encourages plurality of voices and expands the public agenda” (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 238) making narcissistically motivated blogs democratizing in a unique way.

To be sure though, for every given point of view about new media, there is a counter viewpoint, and rightly so because nothing about new media in terms of theory and ideology has solidified yet. But this much is true in much of Africa’s case: a radical transformation in communication is underway as traditional oral forms become “not only increasingly subservient to modern communications” such as mobile telephones, computers, and other related personal communications services, “but modern communication is also getting more abundant and more robust in form” (Ogundimu, 2002, p. 210). It can, however, be argued that modern communications systems extend

and amplify, rather than subordinate, oral communication. This is precisely the case with the intersection between mobile phones and FM radio, where, as will be discussed later (see Chapter Five) people who call into various programs feel they are speaking to many more people than they would be without both mobile phones and radio.

The changes brought about by new technologies are touching off a lot of excitement as they introduce experiences that hitherto never existed or could have been imagined. The ultimate game changer without a doubt has been and remains the mobile phone. For a large number of people who for a long time have been left behind, the ability to access such instant communication is nothing but astonishing. As one observer noted, “The reason why mobile phones are so valuable to people in the poor world is that they are providing access to telecommunications for the very first time, rather than just being portable adjuncts to existing fixed-line phones, as in the rich world” (The Economist, 2009, p. 3).

More interestingly for people in the so-called poor world, the importance of the mobile phone has risen as it conjuncts with FM radios, providing an unimaginable platform for expression as chapter five will reveal. While the Internet slowly makes its way to and around Africa, and while “there is no doubt that it will have an impact on how Africans communicate with each other and the rest of the world in the years ahead” (Leslie, 2002, p. 124), the mobile phone is farther on its way to becoming ubiquitous. The underdeveloped countries of the world generally account for this but “Africa is the region with the fastest rate of subscriber growth” (The Economist, 2009, p. 4).

As new uses for these gadgets emerge, they will unlock a range of social and economic benefits which will clearly illuminate the ‘network effects’ of mobile phones

and firmly establish them as a vital development tools. And if that is not all, the mobile phone might as well accelerate the speed of Internet penetration where levels remain abysmally low. As some analysts have noted, when within five to ten years from now everyone in the world potentially has a mobile phone, “3G networks capable of broadband speeds will be widespread even in developing countries, and even faster 4G networks will be spreading rapidly in some places” (The Economist, 2009, p. 18). There are also projections that “many people will have their first introduction to the Internet through a mobile [phone] and not through a laptop or a desktop” (Cerf, 2007).

The next chapter reviews Uganda’s news media, the state of telecommunications and information technologies, in which new media emerge and are anchored. The aim is to capture the most overarching features that help in understanding the nature of the current landscape as well as how the future is shaping up to be in order avoid ‘copying and pasting’ the realities of other places.

CHAPTER THREE

NEWS MEDIA, TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES IN UGANDA

Discounting oral communication, newspapers in Uganda and generally in Eastern Africa, like elsewhere in the world, are the oldest form of all mass media. Their texture throughout their existence has been shaped both by unique circumstances and those they share with other African countries, as the following discussion will demonstrate.

Above everything else, since the colonial period until now, news media outlets in Uganda have struggled with the state for recognition of their right to exist and operate freely. The relationship between the two remains acrimonious. Some scholars have noted that, “The fortunes of the press in the different countries [in Sub-Saharan Africa] have mirrored the quality and vagaries of their democratisation” (Ibelema & Bosch, 2009, p. 293). And this is nowhere truer than in Uganda. As Zie Gariyo has noted concisely, “The struggle for free expression and a free press has been one of the most sustained democratic struggles in the history of Ugandan politics” and those among the press corps who have “consistently and vociferously sought to establish their democratic right to exist” have more often “staked their lives in this pursuit” (1993, p. 1).

As this chapter will demonstrate, generally the country’s history is filled with failed dreams, accounts of despair and human tragedy resulting from rulers turning against their people, political upheaval and economic stagnation. In both pre- and post independence Uganda, political activities have been banned or severely constrained, and civil society has remained weak, or has been stifled or co-opted by the state. Participation in the political process has mostly been limited to voting in fraudulent elections, and

there has been a general infringement on people's rights. Independent journalism has not been tolerated and the state has maintained tight reins on mass media such as radio, which it has used to serve only its interests (Mutibwa, 1992; Mwesige, 2004).

In most African countries, the first newspapers were set up by missionaries and were mainly religious in nature. The papers that were established right after these catered to the "information, education and entertainment needs of the large white settler communities, leaving the black readership at the mercy of an irrelevant content and/or in search of alternative channels of communication" (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 40). This discrimination of Africans, however, gave rise to the African press, which "appeared at a specific time not merely as a protest press but to present specific and popular grievances directed both at the colonial regime and their allies" (Gariyo, 1994, p. 410). The African elite saw the press as an opportunity to dignify themselves, to articulate their views and those of indigenous people in general who had been left out of the colonialist press, and to have their voices heard on public affairs. For that reason, the press was "mainly political" and served as "an influential element in the African nationalist awakening" (Faringer, 1991, p. 8).

The views and grievances the African elite were concerned with mainly pertained to discrimination and exploitation. In Uganda, for instance, non-white contributing correspondents to the first commercially published newspaper in 1912, *The Uganda Herald*, started vigorous debate on issues ranging from indigenous education, forced labour, indigenous wages on public works to the role of missionaries. The debates also included "forcible appropriation of land by colonialism in favour of its agents and allies" as well as questioning and analysing "the foundations of the colonial order" all of which

would later form the main basis of the struggle against colonial rule (Gariyo, 1994, p. 411). Interestingly, the paper had been set up to cater to white European residents and planters' interests.

Colonial authorities became afraid of the indigenous press although it was “technically and economically inferior” to the white settler and colonial press. They “perceived it as a threat to their power and privilege” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 41). Therefore, in order to control it, they instituted, in almost all territories, “strict laws regulating the right of Africans to set up and operate newspapers, aimed at stifling the spread of ‘subversive’ ideas.” They also imposed economic measures “to make it difficult for African newspaper proprietors to import newsprint and other technical facilities” (p.41).

In Uganda, the first laws to control the press came as early as 1910 even when there was no significant newspaper publications and circulation of published material at the time. “These laws provided stiff penalties for any publication if it violated the law” including a hefty bond before commencement of publication; stiff punishment “if they published any information regarding British military movements, ships, war material, or plans” (Gariyo, 1993, p. 4-5). The laws also gave “extensive powers to the colonial governor to declare a press censorship” and they empowered colonial courts to order destruction of all copies of any published material if they committed any offence and a suspension for a specified time (Ibid.).

With that, seeds of antagonism between the state and the news media were sown and since then to date, every succeeding state, including those that had been outspoken against colonialism and its practices, has relied on legal and economic sabotage and brute

force as its weapons of choice whenever it has felt threatened by the media and therefore felt the need to rein it in. This antagonism between state and news media, and broadly between the state and a people's desire to freely express themselves, to participate in the way they are governed, and to pursue their highest aspirations, is one of the most sustained struggles in all the socio-political and economic upheaval Uganda has witnessed throughout its history. It also illustrates the single most shameless betrayal of many an African leader to their people. As one commentator has eloquently noted of postcolonial states,

Before independence, the cry of the African nationalists was for freedom. The assumption was that the nationalist leaders were talking about freedom for their people – all of their people. There may have been a time when African leaders fighting colonialism actually believed in individual liberties. But in retrospect, it now appears as if the freedom they fought for was freedom for them to rule the people (in Mutibwa, 1992, p. x).

Ironically, the states' efforts to stifle free expression of alternative views has only galvanized it as those at the forefront have been pushed to devise more sophisticated strategies to get their message out that are hard to monitor and control. These have included going underground and relying on pamphlets, tracts, clandestine radio and word of mouth for transmission of information. These have been helped along by other alternative forms of communication such as political rumour, humour, parody, irony and derision – known under various sources in different regions – which have served as substitutes or supplements to the shackled press. In Uganda, one such source for political rumour is Radio Katwe (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Wilcox, 1975; Gariyo, 1993). As will be discussed later in Chapter Four, in 2006 an acerbic news website named Radio Katwe emerged and succeeded in causing a storm in that year's general elections.

Media Repression after Colonialism

In spite of all manner of strictures from the colonial state, indigenously owned newspapers played an invaluable role in anti-colonial struggles in Uganda and Africa in general. Yet, if the Ugandan intelligentsia and news media ever hoped, as indeed they did, for a more harmonious relationship with the postcolonial state and more tolerance for divergent political opinions, those hopes were dashed in their infancy. As one observer has noted,

If the colonial state was successful at inhibiting the formation of organised interest groups and engagement in activities through which citizens could exercise some upward flow of influence and opposition to the regime” and which it was, “the postcolonial state took political controls to new authoritarian heights” (Mwesige, 2004, p. 49).

The first postcolonial regime under Apollo Milton Obote² and his Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) party quite early perceived the role of the media as principally “to assist the machinery of state in facilitating the process of development in a manner that was designed to achieve national cohesion among otherwise disparate ethnic groups” (Ocitti, 2005, p. 28). This development approach to the media, as Denis McQuail has called it, was fairly common throughout most so-called developing countries in the 1960s (McQuail, 1987).

Uganda is highly multi-ethnic, with 56 distinct communities spread across the country. Ethnicity has and remains a flashpoint in the country’s socio-political fabric. It informs how people perceive the distribution of resources and access to opportunities.

² Obote ruled Uganda twice; first from 1962-1971 as its first executive prime minister and later president and again from 1981-1985. At both times he was ousted by the military. His two governments are here differentiated as first and second.

Cognizant of this fact, and of the influence of the media, the inclination of the first Obote government “was that the press had to ‘talk development’, not politics; and if it had to talk politics at all, then the criticism had to be ‘constructive’” (Tabaire, 2007, p. 195). The worldview of the government was well captured in a commentary in *Transition*, a leading literary magazine both in Uganda and the whole of Africa at the time; “the not very subtle apology for all condemnations of criticism was always the same syllogism: nation building is the goal; criticism (euphemism: subversion or division) interferes with nation building; the goal cannot tolerate criticism” (in Tabaire, 2007, p. 195). *Transition* had several pitched battles with the state as its editors attempted to assert its right to exist and its contributors’ right to free expression. Through these struggles, it revealed the full extent of the state’s repression and the extent to which its leaders had walked away from the ideals such as individual civil liberties, individual self-determination around which they had fought against colonialism.

Obote’s government “controlled cooperatives, undermined the autonomy of trade unions, infiltrated student and youth organisations – turning them into government instruments – and stifled other established institutions of representative democracy” (Mwesige, 2004, p. 49). News media became a central tool of the new authoritarianism of the postcolonial state. Obote’s first government, and all that have succeeded it since, continued with the draconian colonial laws on the press, exercising complete control over radio and television, and banning most private newspapers. As Gariyo has noted eloquently:

...the period after 1962 [when Uganda regained independence from the British] also saw the extinction of the dominant section of the African press which had shown its vibrancy and had caused the

colonial regime a lot of headache...The colonial regime's law on the press...was in 1963 amended and enacted as an Act of Parliament by the new regime.

On top of the stiff penalties it imposed on the press, the ordinance provided for the registration of newspapers and a Registrar of Newspapers, the execution of bonds, and imposed certain duties and penalties on printers and publishers who contravened the Act (1993, p. 26).

The provisions of *The Newspaper and Publication Act* and related laws offer lessons in absurdity. s.4 provided for a fine or imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year or both for lodging return or notice which is false material; s.7, a fine for failure to print the name and address of such publisher and printer thereof; s.8, a fine for failure to print the name of the printer on every page; s.9, a fine for failure to keep for three months a copy of any newspaper or document printed on behalf of or at the request of another person; s.18, a fine for failure to register a newspaper; and s.21 empowered ANY police officer to seize any book or newspaper wherever it was found if he or she reasonably suspected it to have been printed or published in contravention of the Ordinance. And if that wasn't enough, a related law *The Press Censorship and Correction Act* provided for a Press Censorship Board to determine what got published (Gariyo, 1993).

The *Penal Code Act* on the other hand empowered the minister, acting in the public interest, but under his absolute discretion, to prohibit, by statutory order, the importation of all publications, or any of them, periodical or otherwise. Section 38.1 criminalized the importation, publication, sale, offers for sale, distribution or reproduction of any prohibited publication with the guilty person liable for first offence for imprisonment for two years or to a fine or to both imprisonment and fine, and for a

subsequent offence to imprisonment for three years; s.38.2 provided penalties for mere possession of a prohibited publication and the guilty person would be liable for a first offence to one year or to a fine or to both imprisonment and fine and for a subsequent offence for imprisonment for two years; s.41 provided for sedition and seditious publications; s.42, seditious offences; s.43 not only provided for the punishment of a person who published seditious material but also provided for the confiscation of printing machines; s.51 provided for defamation of a foreign dignitary; while ss.174-181 provided for other forms of defamation and punishments thereto on conviction (Gariyo, 1993).

Most of these laws have been used to arrest journalists, none more so than sedition, which is defined in very broad terms as any instance where a person utters or publishes statements intended to bring hatred, contempt or disaffection against the President, the Government or the Judiciary. It is important to note that every succeeding state has used the law of sedition against journalists. By maintaining and entrenching the restrictive legal regime the colonial government had instituted, the new regime succeeded in re-incarnating the old oppressive colonial state. Therefore, just halfway into the first decade of independence almost all independent news media had ceased publishing. Unfortunately, this was not unique to Uganda. The independence movement across Africa consolidated indigenous and private initiatives in press ownership, but only temporarily. The succeeding governments reaped more in terms of maintaining and controlling the press since, “both as paymasters and as gatekeepers of public interest, African governments have, almost without exception, kept the press in check” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 42).

The Period of Turbulence

From here on and throughout the first 25 years of Uganda's independence in 1987, with exception of a very short-lived reprieve in 1979, the fortunes of the country's news media could only get worse. When Idi Amin overthrew Obote in 1971, one of the 18 reasons his government issued justifying the coup noted "the lack of freedom in the airing of different views on political and social matters" (Ocitti, 2005, p. 49). But Amin's government did not stop at that. It established the first ever school of journalism and supported a number of seminars on how to improve journalistic practice. In addition to that, "the day's minister of information encouraged journalists to dig out news and other intelligent opinions in the great place of ideas if newspapers were going to be meaningful" (p. 49).

However, and unbeknown to the media, all this belied the true nature of the regime as would soon be clear. Within a short time, both print and broadcast media became victim to the regime's dictatorial tendencies. Several newspapers ceased publication, the largest circulating and most influential daily, *The Uganda Argus*, was nationalized and changed to *Voice of Uganda*, while other publications were taken over by the state. A number of outspoken "journalists were killed as a result of their work" (Gariyo, 1993, p. 33). In Amin's Uganda all manner of competition or criticism ceased, "all political party activity and most civil rights" were suspended, Amin "dissolved the national assembly and ruled by decree" and "several security agencies presided over a 'reign of terror'." Citizen participation "was reduced to attending meetings called by government representatives" (Mwesige, 2004, p. 49, 51).

In Amin's time, journalism, like the country, all but died and what survived was a shameful imitation of the profession. His regime's level of brutality, "ruthless killing of persons critical to its murderous tendencies", succeeded in cowing the news media so much so that "it operated as if it was oblivious of the events unfolding in the country." In the things that got covered during that time, "few incidences if not none of disappearances of persons which were rampant were ever reported" (Gariyo, 1993, p. 33-34). The extreme repression in Amin's regime institutionalized self-censorship.

At the height of Amin's control of the press, all newspapers were directed "to print every word of Amin's speeches and to publish a photograph of him at least once every two days." Radio and television, which were his favourites, were required "to broadcast the speeches in their totality, regardless of how long they were." Any editor who disobeyed this directive "paid for it with his job, and sometimes his life" (Ocitti, 2005, p. 58). To be sure, working as a journalist became highly risky and akin to signing one's death sentence. All it took was reporting a story that irked a government official. And there was no way to know beforehand who would be angered by what story.

Amin was ousted by a combined force of Tanzanian soldiers and Ugandan guerrilla groups in 1978. The period immediately after his overthrow through to early 1981 was particularly unstable. As such, the press took advantage of the space created by the absence of a strong, central authority and established itself again and flourished in all sorts of ways. The press also benefited from the political jostling that was going on and the struggles for political supremacy. As Ocitti has noted, "the need to influence public opinion by various political elements as a way of gaining support led to a sudden rush to establish newspapers immediately after the Amin regime fell" (2005, p. 72).

Along new publications that sprung up, “Newspaper publications that had been stifled since the mid-60s found themselves with immense freedom and used it to publish anything” (Gariyo, 1993, p.35). Because they were totally unfettered, they were highly partisan and never disguised their agendas so much so that they stopped short of sparking a media war (Onyango-Obbo, 1997). At least 30 newspapers and 40 journals emerged in the period immediately after Amin’s overthrow, some poorly produced, “all belonging and representing a variety of political and other interests” (Ocitti, 2005, p. 72-73). The poorly produced ones, however, were soon squeezed out by competition as the larger and serious newspapers positioned themselves to play a national role in highlighting the challenges of the day and offering alternative ways of tackling them. These papers, however, never got an opportunity to play this role.

The Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF), which replaced Amin’s government, as Mwesige has noted, was soon eaten up by factionalism and became mistrustful of the press (2004, p. 51). In characteristic dictatorial style, the day’s Minister of Internal Affairs banned three critical newspapers and detained the editor of the government-owned newspaper and with that the honeymoon was over. As Gariyo has noted, “An independent critical voice on political, economic and social matters could not be tolerated nor could state policies and corrupt state functionaries and politicians be publicly questioned. With the advent of the UPC regime in December 1980, any pretence at press freedom [was] simply discarded” (1993, p. 36).

The general elections that returned Milton Obote from exile to lead the country for the second time were mired in controversy. One section of the population felt they had been fair, while others felt Obote’s party had rigged them. As the Democratic Party,

one of the four political parties that fielded candidates and which many felt had actually won the elections, headed to parliament to lead the opposition, Yoweri Museveni, a candidate for another participating party, the Uganda Patriotic Movement (UPM), which came third, formed a rebel group, the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M), and headed to the bush to wage a guerrilla war on the new government.

As a war president, Obote “became paranoid, and as a result his government had a very bitter relationship with the media” (Onyango-Obbo, 1997) all throughout this second stint in power. As one observer has noted, Obote simply picked up from where he had left off in January 1971, when he was first overthrown. In just one month, March 1981, his government banned five of the main newspapers, including the influential *Weekly Topic*. Two more were banned in September. The editor of the government-owned *Uganda Times* was sacked when the newspaper carried a report implicating the military in civilian killings other atrocities in the north-west of the country (Tabaire, 2007, p. 203).

The foreign press was not spared either. They were accused of misrepresenting Uganda’s image through their “irresponsible reporting” and as a result, “as many as eight journalists were expelled, some arrested, some denied entry and others forced to leave the country” (Ocitti, 2005, p. 83). New rules of accreditation were adopted, including demanding foreign news outlets to have fully fledged offices in Kampala, Uganda’s capital, and have fulltime journalists as opposed to freelancer, stringer or itinerants (Ibid.).

In sum then, by 1984 the 30 newspapers and 40 journals that had emerged in the period immediately after Amin’s overthrow, or for that matter, “the number of papers that could be defined as representing views different from those of the government had been

reduced to a handful” and in the same period “a number of journalists working for these newspapers and periodicals had either been arrested before, or some were in jail” (Boyle, 1988, p. 48). Just as had happened in colonial days, critical news media were pushed underground only to re-emerge later more pointed, and with a stronger resolve to fight for its survival. This time it would also benefit from a changing international political order. With the end of the Cold War, western countries started scaling back covert political and financial support to dictatorial governments and instead stepped up pressure for transparency, accountability and the respect for civil liberties.

Post-1986: The Media as Unofficial Opposition

There perhaps has not been any period more intriguing, or even paradoxical, for both news media and its observers or commentators, a period which has elicited as much glowing praise and sharp criticism as one since Museveni and his NRM took power in 1986 to date. As one journalist has captured it so well,

Over the last twenty years, President Yoweri Museveni has baffled observers with his relations with the Ugandan media. He has simultaneously been the strongest promoter of press freedom and its biggest threat. He has jailed and prosecuted as many journalists as he has dined with.

He has contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of free expression and also contributed to the one of fear, intimidation and self censorship that now pervades Ugandan media. He has participated in as many radio talk-shows as he has worked hard to kill. He was central in the liberalisation of the media and equally central in closing down radio stations that did not agree with him (Matsiko wa Mucoori, 2009).

Another journalist, echoing similar insights as above, has added more succinctly that,

For a long time now, Ugandans and foreigners have praised the government of President Yoweri Museveni for being “tolerant” of

press freedom...When Museveni has been in good mood or on top of public debate he has allowed and defended a high degree of free debate. Yet whenever he has felt threatened, he has not hesitated to unleash the wrath of the state on anyone who dares challenge him.

Thus, over the years, critical voices in our media have been systematically eliminated or threatened – some through bribery using state patronage...some have been forced into exile... others have been killed and the rest have [a lot] of criminal charges against them (Mwenda, 2009).

Myriad incidences bear out these observations. Topping the list is the most recent single largest state clampdown of news media. In September 2009, following violent protests in Kampala, Uganda's capital city, and parts of the central region, the government effectively shut down four radio stations, demanded the suspension of 11 radio presenters, and ordered all radio stations across the country to halt political debate programming including the notoriously popular open-air talk shows locally known as *ebimeeza*.³ The protests arose from attempts by the government to block the king of the country's largest ethnic group, the Baganda, from visiting part of his kingdom north of the city. Although kings in Uganda largely hold ceremonial power as traditional and cultural leaders, the one of Buganda particularly has very considerable political influence because of the size and central location of his kingdom. Because of this, there are always political tensions between the central government and the kingdom both of which sit in the capital.

It is important to note that Museveni's government did not start out this way. Quite ironically it had beginnings similar to those of Amin's. If, as some have argued, news media in 1979 owed their fortunes more to the political jostling of the day and less

³ *Ebimeeza* is a Luganda plural for *Ekimeeza*, meaning roundtable

on their own initiatives, the reverse was true during Museveni's five-year armed struggle. Given the way the media felt persecuted by the second Obote government, it "unflinchingly supported the rebellion hoping again", like in the struggle against colonialism, "for better times with the incoming government" (Ocitti, 2005, pp. 91-92). Indeed, "this fact was not lost on Museveni when he captured power. His NRM [party] took a relatively more relaxed attitude toward the press and found it necessary to be tolerant of free media in order to carve its image as a more open and progressive government than its predecessors" (Onyango-Obbo, 1997).

As had been the case immediately Amin was ousted, Museveni's ascension to power in 1986 opened the gates for news media. As one scholar has noted, "There was a proliferation of freewheeling newspapers. By 1998 more than 70 new publications had been registered. They represented a diversity of ownership and views and seemed to speak well of official government tolerance and openness" (Robins, 1997, p. 125). As one observer has noted, "Instead of monologues and one-way pontificating by an oligarchy, which had characterised previous regimes, there was debate and dialogue, which was a good sign for governance and for democracy" (Kajoba, 1998, p. 138). Tabaire has added how, "At any time since the NRM came to power, there has been an average of a dozen publications in Kampala" (2007, p. 203).

In the early 1990s, owing to external pressures from international funding organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Western governments like the U.S. and Britain, and its fierce need to be perceived differently, the government deregulated and liberalized the airwaves, which led to an explosion of private and independent radio stations some have referred to as an "FM

revolution” (Onyango-Obbo in Mwesige, 2004, p. 2). Uganda was the first country to do so in the whole of Africa “where the state and exclusive monopoly of broadcast media were synonymous” (Robins, 1997, p. 125). At the dawn of the FM revolution 17 years ago, Uganda boasted only one radio station, which was exclusively owned and operated by the government and served only their interests. Yet as of February 2009, Uganda has up to “204 registered radio stations, 181 of which are in operation” (Uganda Communication Commission, 2009).

Museveni introduced major reforms and presided over a significant reversal in Uganda’s socio-political and economic fortunes. He won the hearts of Western governments and major international funding sources and came to personify what former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright hailed as the “new breed” of strong African leaders, the ‘beacons of hope’, “the kind of men who front this [Africa] continent’s renaissance” (McGreal, 1997, p. 10).

Yet it was lost on them that the trade-off for these reforms, particularly the media, had been a total ban on political parties and any related political activity. Until 2005, all the new constitution allowed them was merely to exist. They could not open and operate local branches; hold delegates’ conferences; organise public rallies sponsor or campaign for electoral candidates. In effect, the Museveni government was a *de facto* one party state like all those before it even though he wanted everyone to believe, during his inaugural speech in 1986, that it was not “a mere change of guard” but rather “a fundamental change in the politics of our country” (Museveni, 2000, p. 3).

In the absence of a credible opposition, the media, most particularly privately-owned and independent, found itself by default filling in that role. This essentially

explains all the media's woes with the state which came to perceive even its simplest mistakes as a conscious misinformation by an 'organised opponent'. The government then equated any sort of criticism to an act of hostility by an opposition bent on bringing it down (Tabaire, 2007; Mwesige, 2004). Thus, whereas it can be said there is relative press freedom in Uganda today, one observer has noted "the independent press under Museveni is alive, but not necessarily well. Uganda's press is "free" only compared to the past. Amin murdered journalists; now they are detained and eventually released, often after losing their personal property, or their publications have folded" (Robins, 1997, p. 127).

Since Museveni allowed the relative degree of press freedom by default, he is neither a believer nor supporter of a free press. He "once told newspaper editors in an off-the-record meeting that if it were not for pressure from Western donors, he would have dealt with the Ugandan press with an iron hand" (Mwesige, 2004, p. 64-65). Ironically, he has actually done so. Museveni has compared journalists to common criminals, and referred to them as the opposition. Among his many insults directed at journalists, he has accused them of being errant, unpatriotic, economic saboteurs, and enemies of the state. What's more, journalists live under a constant threat of being arrested and imprisoned and must constantly assess themselves as to how far they are willing to stay in the beleaguered profession (Robins, 1997, p. 127)

In a pointed case in November 2008, Museveni promised military action in reaction to a lead story in *Daily Monitor*, the largest circulating privately-owned and independent newspaper, which revealed wide income irregularities between partisan political leaders and other public officials. The story was based on official salary

structures issued by the Ministry of Public Service. Museveni, while addressing the national local authorities association, referred to the reporters and the newspaper in general as “errant journalists and economic saboteurs” and added,

We did not spill a lot of blood [during the five-year guerrilla war] to turn our country into a laughing stock... We need some discipline. If you do not have something wise you are talking about, you just shut up, shut up! (Butagira et al., 2008, p. 1)

Even with such a fraught relationship with the media, Museveni and his government do not miss an opportunity to praise themselves for enabling the freest media in Africa because there are numerous radio stations across the country and several publications on the street. But Gariyo has upended this argument by noting very concisely that,

A free press is not necessarily how many newspapers are circulating at any one given time. It is, much more importantly, what they are able to say. Secondly, the state cannot be the guarantor of a free press. It must recognise its existence. It must recognise that without a free press there is little guarantee of democratic practice. Thirdly, the demand for a free press is a demand for a democratic society. A free press, that is free discussion of public issues, is the conscience of a democratic society (1993, p. 1).

For him then, “The NRM cannot be credited with establishing press freedom in Uganda. The limited freedom now enjoyed by the press is mainly through their hard-won struggle from below.” He has added, as we shall see shortly, that the NRM has maintained similar laws and practices from past regimes going back to colonial days. For that matter, “A government which claims to guarantee press freedom and then goes ahead to prosecute journalists for publishing articles critical of aspects of the regime’s policies cannot claim such magnanimity” (p. 36).

Indeed, that Museveni's government can summon the courage to suspend political programming contradicts all its claims of promoting free expression, or even being democratic. Political talk shows, which are one of the defining features of FM radio in Uganda, as Mwesige has noted,

[P]lay a mediating role in the political process by simultaneously providing a platform for both political and civic participation. Talk shows facilitate political competition through offering opportunities for government leaders, political groups, and civil society organisations to speak directly with and mobilise public support.

The government articulates its agenda on the talk shows. At the same time, opposition politicians and civil society groups have an opportunity to challenge government over the same issues, articulate alternative political agendas, and demand accountability.

At another level, talk radio has turned into a civic forum through which citizens attempt to exert influence upward on political leaders, question, challenge, and demand accountability from official power holders, engage in public discourse and debate, and acquire information about public affairs" (2004, p. 4).

The government's decision to suspend these talk shows further demonstrates its aversion to free speech, to accountability, criticism, and to a free exchange of divergent viewpoints and casts further doubt over its claims about causing a fundamental change to the country's politics.

The Restrictive Laws That Won't Go Away

Museveni's government likes to portray itself as different from previous regimes yet its weapons of choice against the media – direct threats and intimidations and choking legislation – are not dissimilar from those of regimes before him. His government "has not been keen on repealing most of the obnoxious laws which limit press freedom nor

have they restrained police from arresting journalists on mere suspicion or pressing charges against journalists for articles [they have written” (Gariyo, 1993, p. 36).

According to Tabaire, every year that Museveni has been in power there has been at least one reported case of media harassment. In the first eight years, between 1986 and 2004, “more than 24 journalists were arraigned before the courts of law on criminal publication offences” (2007, p. 205). This number has since jumped to over 30 journalists, “with some facing a multiplicity of charges” (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2008). This is all in spite of provisions in Uganda’s Constitution which guarantee “freedom of speech and expression, including freedom of the press and other media; freedom of thought, conscience and belief; freedom to assemble and to demonstrate together with others peacefully and unarmed and to petition; and freedom of association among others” (Uganda Parliament, 1995).

The government has instituted “an unnecessary multiplicity of legislation and bodies governing media operations in Uganda; so much so that it is not clear, both in practise and under the law, which body does what and at what time” (Sewanyana, 2007, p. 29). As a result, they have succeeded in fuelling “confusion and created a situation where the suppression and manipulation of the media houses has been made easy, that is, when one body seems independent and unwilling to execute an unlawful and unnecessary closure or seizure, the other body is used to execute the restrictions” (Ibid.).

As for the actual laws, there is for instance, the *Press and Journalist Act 1995*, which is designed to professionalize the media. It not only stipulates licensing journalists but also privileges academic papers – a university degree in journalism or postgraduate training in journalism – as a prerequisite for obtaining a licence. The law comes up short

because it is out of touch with Uganda's socioeconomic realities – the fact that it is still expensive for most people to obtain a university degree – and for redefining journalistic professionalism from such principles as fairness and balance, accuracy, objectivity and placing the premium on an academic paper. It has also been criticized as “retrogressive since it places the task of overseeing the enforcement within the government” (Sewanyana, 2007, p. 23).

Then there is the *Penal Code Act*, which empowers the minister of information, “if he deems it to be in the public interest”, to stop a publication's work. The public interest remains unexplained and as such the minister is left with all discretion to interpret and determine what that entails. The law “prohibits the publication of seditious material” including that with intention “to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the person of the President, the Government as by law established, or the Constitution” or “to subvert or promote the subversion of the Government or the administration of a district” (Cap 120 Laws of Uganda, Section 39). It further outlaws publication of material deemed to be defamatory and criminalizes publication of material likely to promote sectarianism, or material that incites, or encourages the public to refuse or delay to pay tax. Again, none of this is clearly explained and its boundaries marked out. It is all left to the government to determine both the parameters of such kind of information and the punishment for those who go beyond.

There is also the *Anti-Terrorism Act 2002*, which “criminalizes journalists' efforts to meet and speak with people considered to be a terrorists, again imposing a possible death sentence on the convicted.” It also “compels journalists to disclose their sources of information”, which has been interpreted as a direct affront to the practise of journalism.

But like the Penal Code, “the Act does not provide a definition of a terrorist organization” and so journalists are severely constrained from reporting in conflict areas because of the fear that they will be accused of talking to terrorists. In turn, “the law deprives the public of information vital for its understanding of the conflict” (Sewanyana, 2007, p. 32).

More recently, the government is pushing through a draft law, Regulation of Interception of Communications (RIC) Bill, which provides for the interception and monitoring certain communication in the course of their transmission through telecommunication, postal or any related service or system “claiming it was intended to fight terrorism and curb crime” (Kiwuwa & Odyek, 2009). The draft law, widely referred to as the phone tapping bill, has met with strong criticisms from all sections of the country. Leading the charge are human rights organisations and the Uganda Law Society who have condemned it as infringing on people’s inherent fundamental rights to privacy, expression, speech, assembly and association and to that end it is out rightly unconstitutional. They have also condemned it for “usurping the authority of the judiciary, as the traditional custodian of people’s rights, since it vests powers for monitoring and implementation in the office of the security minister” (Nalugo, 2009).

For journalists, the draft law is further evidence of the government’s intentions to squeeze out any remaining independence. As Amnesty International noted, “The bill portends increased potential for human rights violations when it is read together with the Anti-Terrorism Act, both of whose terms and scopes are cast too widely and too generally.” As they elaborate further;

The broad and general grounds on which a warrant authorising interception may be issued under the RIC Bill and the broad and

loose definition of offences under section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act create increased risk of human rights violations...

These broad definitions extend to sections 8 and 9 of the Anti-Terrorism Act which create additional offences including the offence of supporting an institution for "publishing or disseminating news or materials that promote terrorism" an offence which may be construed to inhibit the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, in particular, by the press.

Journalists may fear having their communications with their sources of information interfered with on the basis that they are dealing with people who, subject to possible broad interpretation under the Anti-Terrorism Act, are suspected of committing offences linked to terrorism (Amnesty International, 2008).

Journalists and advocates of civil rights have not taken the state's infringement without a fight. As Tabaire has observed, "unlike the Obote I period when the press retreated in the face of government intimidation, under Museveni news media have organised and campaigned to protect their own freedoms" (2007, p.204). There have been strong editorials in defence of free speech and expression, including a free media environment. Journalists have demonstrated an unusual boldness in their jobs in the face of insurmountable challenges from the state, and they have also successfully mounted legal challenges to legislation that impede their work. For instance, in 2004, journalists contested "Section 50 of the Uganda Penal Code, which criminalizes publication of 'any false statement, rumour or report which is likely to cause fear and alarm to the public or to disturb the public peace'" and had it struck off the penal code "in effect outlawing the publication of anything that might be judged to be 'false news'" (Tabaire, 2007, p. 193).

They have also challenged the constitutionality of the law against sedition as well as one against promoting sectarianism that many journalists have been charged with. The state has lost all but one of these cases. But even with such successes, journalists'

struggle is far from over. Besides, the legal battles benefit the government's image too, as they project it as adhering to the rule of law. As Onyango-Obbo noted, they fit well with the more "sophisticated anti-media strategy Museveni's government adopted, which mainly was to engineer a public mood in favour of censorship" (1997). When journalists have to regularly report into police, to stand court trial for supposedly breaking the law, and to fight injunctions, the government succeeds in creating an atmosphere within the public that perhaps the journalists might be wrong. Indeed, these "constant assaults . . . freedom of the press", as Onyango-Obbo refers to them, "have engendered "relatively more tolerance of restrictions on the media today, than there was at any time in the past" (1997).

The September news media clampdown illustrates this clearly. Apart from a few media and human rights-related organizations, there was not any public protest against the government's actions. In fact, reactions were mixed as to whether the government acted appropriately or whether it was trampling over the freedom of the media, which further illustrates the success of the Uganda government's anti-media tactics. Thus, the media remains very much under the mercy of the state which has established a reputation of running roughshod over the law and doing as it wishes whenever it has felt the need to deliver quick results. Its weapons of choice have already been discussed as a combination of legal and economic sabotage as well as sheer brute force.

The *Daily Monitor* has, unfortunately, suffered the brunt of Museveni's government, which has used it as a salutary lesson to others news media, or even political opponents. In October 2002, nine years after declaring and five years after lifting an advertising ban on the paper respectively, the government raided and shut it down for

over one week for running a story alleging rebels in northern Uganda had shot down an army chopper. In August 2005, the government took Kfm radio, a sister company to *Daily Monitor*, off the air, alleging it had failed to meet broadcasting standards. In November of the same year, state security operatives raided *Daily Monitor* again, alleging it was printing posters appealing for financial support to legally defend Museveni's leading challenger in the presidential campaigns, whom he had put in prison. Today, the newspaper's managing editor, its news editor, and a number of its senior reporters face a multiplicity of charges before the courts of law.

The government has cracked its whip on other media as well. In June 2002, Radio Veritas in Eastern Uganda was closed for two months with government claiming it defied a ministerial directive not to broadcast news about rebel attacks. Twice in 2008, state operatives raided *The Independent* newsmagazine, another publication viewed as being harshly critical of government, and arrested three journalists and confiscated equipment on allegations that they were in possession of seditious material. Besides these incidents the media has to deal with constant insults, demonization and stigmatization all intended to force journalists to censor themselves.

FM and Mobile Phones: The Twin Revolution

Unfortunately for the Museveni government and those that might follow after, and fortunately for the news media and average citizens, the broader policy of deregulation, liberalization and privatization in the early 1990s introduced a new set of realities and challenges previous regimes did not have to contend with. The proliferation of mostly FM stations, which has ranked Uganda among the continent's leaders in private radio

penetration, has transformed the media beyond anyone before Museveni's time can recognize. Where previous regimes had only one radio to monitor and control (all a rebel group needed to take power was capture the national radio station), the current and future regimes have 204, and counting, radio stations. As Mwesige has noted, "If radio has always been Uganda's mass medium *par excellence*, it is now a notable feature of public life, contemporary lifestyles and leisure patterns. Be it in the workplace, on the road, farmland in rural areas, or in restaurants and bars, almost all radio sets are tuned to the stereo sounds of the FM stations" (2004, p. 70).

Most importantly, the so-called "FM revolution" has met with another so-called "mobile phone revolution", which also came on the heels of the 1990s reforms to the telecommunications sector. Until 1993, the state monopolized the postal and telecommunications sector and offered poor services, access was far below the average in the region and it turned in low profit. In 1994, the government licensed the first ever mobile operator, Celtel, to provide mobile cellular services. In 1998, another company, Mobile Telephone Networks (MTN), was licensed. And after three failures, the government successfully privatized its 51 percent stake in its postal and telecommunications corporation in 2000, leading to the creation of a third mobile operator, Uganda Telecom Limited (UTL). Today, three more cellular service operators have been licensed and commenced operations, and the estimated total number of mobile subscription is close to nine million people (Shirley et al., 2002; (Uganda Communication Commission, 2008).

Whereas the current level of mobile subscription relative to the country's total population of over 31 million people remains very low, it is considerable when compared

to the pre-mobile era where only fewer than 50,000 people with telephone access. Moreover, preliminary studies on mobile telephony are still very much fluid and have already been criticized for applying disproportionate measures in trying to understand the uptake of mobile phones in Africa. For instance, “the Western idea that only those who own a mobile phone can use one” without distinguishing “between mobile phone subscribers, mobile phone owners, mobile phone users, those who benefit from usage and those who have access to this technology” all of which matter because of the underlying socio-cultural realities (Jeffrey and Versteeg, 2007, p. 118, 120).

As industry studies from one of the leading cellular service providers on the continent have indicated,

...people in Africa use mobile phones very differently. Most striking is the accessibility of mobile. While penetration rates are by the standards of the developed countries low, the way in which mobiles are informally shared between people, the formation of private resellers of mobile services and the provision of mobile phones for public use, all increase accessibility, even in rural communities. The impact of mobile extends well beyond what might be suggested by the number of subscriptions alone. The informal arrangements that extend the reach of telecommunications are very powerful (Vodafone Policy Papers Series, 2005, p.2).

For that reason, and as other observers pointed out, the estimated average penetration rate of mobile phones in Africa might be higher than 6.2 percent which it is said to be at.

In Uganda’s case, this would mean that if you have nine million subscribers (people who have a pre-paid subscriber identity module (SIM) card⁴, since studies indicate that makes up to 90 percent in sub-Saharan Africa,) actual usage could be twice as many, making it very possible that half the population has access to and uses mobile

⁴ A SIM card stores the service subscriber key, which is used to identify each subscriber with a mobile connection.

phones. Therefore, in studying the mobile phone uptake in Africa, care must be taken to separate numbers of those who own phones from those who use them. For instance, some people who do not own mobile sets, and some who do, rely on public phones, which have increased with the growth of the telecom sector and have had other socioeconomic benefits.

With that in mind, as the two communication mediums – private radio and the mobile phone in Uganda – have evolved together, they have come to reinforce one another. The mobile phone has contributed to the success of radio stations by compelling them to design more interactive programmes, which attract more audience participation and higher ratings. In turn, the radio has pushed the frontiers of expression by providing platforms in which many more average citizens are able to participate in this mediated spaces because of access to the mobile phone.

In addition, Internet usage, hitherto hampered by the absence of broadband technology, is fast picking up. Currently, there are three undersea fibre optic cables being laid under the East African seabed with landing nodes in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and Mombasa in Kenya. These cables will finally connect the longest coastline in the world that hitherto remained unconnected to the rest of the world via fibre optic cable and deliver better bandwidth and better speeds. In the short term, “the cables are expected to greatly benefit landlocked Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi” (Odiambo, 2009, p. 32). Later on they will extend to the whole Eastern African region. In the absence of fibre cables and the broadband connectivity it enables, “the region has relied on satellite connections for almost all its communications needs, which is not only very expensive but also slow and unreliable” (Makeni, 2009, p. 44).

These humble technological strides and the uses people have found for them have increased the burden of a government that seeks to control not only the news media but also people's desire to freely express their opinions. As one observer has noted, "This technology has undermined the ability of the Museveni structures to control the terms of gossip, news, political debate and speculation" (Onyango-Obbo, 2007). While another has added, in an age of interactivity, of blogging and text messaging,

Where Obote was wary of a single publication's international reach, Museveni [and those who come after him] must fear the Internet, which now carries websites of Ugandan newspapers and some FM radio stations plus the blogs of individuals. Criticism, once compressed in the voice of a single publication, now swirls around the globe through a myriad of outlets" (Tabaire, 2007, p. 208).

A test of this was on display in the September 2009 protests. When the government shut down four radio stations that were broadcasting live reports of the protests, and by extension cowed other news organisations that might have been harbouring similar ideas, and there was a near complete media blackout on the protests, "many people relied on text messages and various online resources for real-time updates" (Gosier, 2009; King, 2009).

To a certain degree, this was a repeat of similar a scenario in neighbouring Kenya. In December 2007 through January 2008, during that country's presidential elections crisis, when the government banned live news coverage, bloggers and average citizens with mobile phones "became a critical part of the national conversation" and were indispensable as a "critical source of information Kenyans in Nairobi and the [D]iaspora" and other people interested in the country (Rotich & Goldstein, 2008, p. 8).

Although there are still challenges to access and the quality of information being exchanged, the current efforts must not be neglected as they offer good signs to project how the future is likely to turn out when the ubiquity of digital communication increases in Uganda and Africa. The next two chapters focus on primary research data examining the impact mobile phones and the Internet have had and continue to have on Uganda's news media.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INTERNET AND UGANDA'S PRINT NEWS MEDIA: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

This chapter as well as the next, as the introductory chapter of this thesis noted, examines the following central questions: In what ways is the Internet changing journalism in Uganda? What impacts and challenges does it pose to the research and publication of news and information? To what extent does it expand the horizon for free expression? And, what potential does it have to promote democracy in Uganda?

The choice to focus on print media is borne of the fact that websites of mainstream news outlets are at the top of the list of the most visited websites in Uganda. Newspapers remain the most influential, in terms of setting the agenda or directing national debate, in the country even if radio is the most accessed of all media. Far fewer radio stations do their own original reporting. A number of them rely on newspapers for tips for their very brief hourly news bulletins, which are usually less than 10 minutes. Others, particularly those with lean staff, which is the case for a huge percentage of FM radio stations in the country, are used to broadcasting articles from newspapers in their bulletins because of their inability to have their own reporters to cover the events in question, especially those happening in the city.¹ Most of the airtime on FM radio stations is dedicated to music and entertainment.

In addition, almost all radio stations have segments in their early to mid-morning programming where they review all the newspapers. In an interview for this thesis,

¹ This observation is partly based on my experience working at a radio station in Western Uganda for a total of 21 months and anecdotal observations listening to news bulletins at other radio stations across the country.

Bernard Tabaire, formerly the managing editor of *Daily Monitor* and now a media trainer and consultant, cited this programming among the reasons newspaper circulation is going down. He noted that, “For a lot of people that is pretty good enough, they won’t go and buy newspaper after that. And now you can listen to the radio on your phone, you don’t have to have a handset. So wherever you are you can pick up the news and what’s happening and what’s in the newspapers through the reviews” (2009). Mobile phones with integrated radio and camera have increasingly become the most preferred among Ugandan users. Even those which are specifically designed for low-cost users have at least a radio integrated in them.

The rise of the Internet and the news readers’ choice to freely access newspapers online, which is discussed later on in this chapter, only worsens an already bad situation. As B.B. Illakut, the head of the mass communication department at Uganda Christian University, said in an interview for this thesis, “Mainstream media has always faced serious challenges, but now, more so, with the emergence of online media. The circulation has remained static for a long time and now it can only come down because people can access what they want to read online, for free” (2009).

The main reasons for low circulation have continuously included low literacy levels (although there are more educated people today than there have ever been in Uganda’s history), a low reading culture whose roots are traced back to pre-colonial times (although one can argue that if you have more educated people it automatically improves upon a society’s reading culture), the cost of and access to newspapers, although the country’s GDP growth over time would suggest people earn more today and

so have a little more to spend, on even commodities like newspapers, than at any time in history (Kirumira & Ajwang, 2007; World Bank, 2010).

One reason less discussed, if it is ever at all, is the quality and relevance of the newspapers. Could it be that people who are in position to buy newspapers do not think, given what the papers publish, it is worth their money? After all, it is entirely untrue that people do not have money to spend on newspapers if, by comparison, they have it to spend on alcohol. In a 2004 global status report on alcohol, the World Health Organization ranked Uganda as the world's leading consumer of alcohol with an annual per capita consumption of 19.5 litres (World Bank, 2004). What's more, two of the leading breweries are among Uganda's top five taxpayers.

The question, however, is hard to answer definitively in the absence of rigorous quantitative research. Anecdotal evidence, like that of circulation, would suggest something is wrong with newspapers. As Andrew M. Mwenda, managing editor of the weekly *Independent* newsmagazine, noted in an interview for this thesis, "the circulation of both [*Daily*] *Monitor* and [*New*] *Vision* has not grown by even one percent in a country that has limited Internet access. What does that tell you? Possibly most people have written us off" (2009). While this is an area worth investigating, it is beyond the purview of this thesis.

As already mentioned (see Chapter One), research findings discussed in this chapter, as well as the next, result from interviews I conducted over a four-month period in Kampala, Uganda's capital. These interviews involved managing editors (or their representatives) and the web administrators/online editors of the *New Vision*, *Daily Monitor*, *Observer* and *Independent*. Two former managing editors and now media

trainers and consultants, two heads of mass communication departments in two universities, and the national director and the editor-in-chief of Uganda Radio Network, a news agency that relies on the Internet and mobile phones for its entire operations. A researcher in ICTs who has also worked as a journalist, a well-noted researcher and now editor of an online-only publication, and two columnists who have written about new information technologies in Uganda.

I preferred interviewing as a method because I found it more useful in stimulating reflection and interpretation about these new technologies which have fast become very basic accessories to the Ugandan journalist in this era. Interviewing was also crucial to get people I interviewed away from the general discourse about new technologies to think more critically and contextually with regard to Uganda. Equally significant, it solved the financial limitations of the researcher. It was relatively inexpensive compared to conducting much more rigorous quantitative research. Observations made in this and the following chapter, focusing on mobile phones, are cognizant of and take into account the research's limitations.

I have also drawn from my experiences working as a journalist in Uganda and with the new technologies under study, which explains traces of participant observation in my discussion. Whereas both the Internet and mobile phones were introduced in the early 1990s, they actually took off in the early 2000s at the same time I started working as a journalist. Therefore, my experience as a journalist, like that of many others who started out in journalism around the same time, is deeply intertwined with both the Internet and the mobile phone.

This chapter also uses as an extended example of the case of Radiokatwe.com, which has essentially become the poster child of the potential of new information technologies. The website emerged out of nowhere in 2006 onto Uganda's news landscape at the height of the hotly contested presidential election campaign and went on to have such a significant impact. Yet the website cannot be credited for breaking any significant new ground save for the fact, and again only in Uganda's context, that it exploited the advantages associated with the virtual world.

Other than that, in all the other ways it simply picked up well-tested and refined reporting approaches which had first been introduced back in the early 1980s by the now defunct *Weekly Topic*, a privately-owned newspaper, and carried on throughout the 1990s by then the *Monitor*, another privately-owned newspaper, and pushed to their very limits in the 2000s by the *Red Pepper*, a tabloid publishing in English, which is also privately-owned. As one commentator has noted about it, "*Red Pepper* completely rewrote the rulebook. While most of the previous publications didn't always disclose the names of culprits involved in scandals, *Red Pepper* held nothing back" winning itself "the right to publish and be damned" (Onyango-Obbo, 2007). Moreover, unlike its predecessors in that sense, with exception of the *Red Pepper*, Radio Katwe clearly did not subscribe to any journalistic standards, given the kind of content they published, which, as will be evident in the discussion, drew a lot of criticism and would later become its major undoing.

The Internet, as this chapter will demonstrate, has, for larger publications, created a new advertising platform while threatening the life of small ones. It has potentially quickened the journalist's work in terms of communication, research and ease of access

to background information, but has not improved, in any significant way, the quality of stories reported. That is, journalists are not reporting stories of a far superior quality now than before when the Internet was non-existent. Some of the people I interviewed think both the Internet and mobile phones have bred laziness among reporters. As one noted, “I am always outraged when I see stories where journalists say they could not speak to a source because his [or her] mobile phone was switched off. Some of them don’t bother calling [their] offices, or going there physically” (Mwesige, 2009).

To the extent that by free expression is the “fullest liberty of professing and discussing, as a matter of ethical conviction, any doctrine, however immoral it may be considered” (Mill, 1978, p. 15), the Internet, as the case of Radiokatwe.com illustrates, has certainly broadened the horizon for free expression. Unfortunately, it is beyond this thesis to determine the net social and/or political value of such unrestrained expression. Moreover, in an interview for this thesis, Samuel N. Gummah, the national director of Uganda Radio Network, a news agency that provides news and training for over 40 radio stations across the country, cautioned about free expression noting “the technologies in themselves cannot expand horizons of free expression, they can only enable it” (2009).

As for democracy, there is consensus that the Internet, together with mobile phones, possess immeasurable potential. Yet again, Gummah’s caution above can be applied here. The impact technologies have on democracy is determined by what and how people choose to engage with them. In turn it is also dependent on how that engagement intersects with other equally important factors such as political marketing, requisite technical, social and linguistic skills to frame simple and easy to understand but comprehensive messages that make sense, and the “psychosocial skills to understand

what kind of people you are communicating to and where they are” (2009). This is no truer than in Uganda, a multi-ethnic pot containing over 50 different ethnic groups each of which speaks a different dialect or language, and of course each has its own unique needs and expectations.

The real test for new technologies in Uganda then, and particularly more the mobile phone than the Internet, lies in the general elections in 2011. Although elections are just one aspect of democracy, they have become the litmus test with which countries are judged to be democratic or not. Because of that, new technologies have tended to gain prominence during elections because of the intensity of the exercise and the heightened participation it stirs. Some of the people interviewed for this thesis noted how people use and rely on them during the election season will provide reliable evidence to their worthiness in regard to promoting democracy.

Since the first election under Museveni’s long-running presidency in 1996 through to the second in 2001 and the third in 2006, as well as the intervening years in between all these general elections, political campaigning has experimented with new information technologies as they have kept becoming more familiar, better and reliable in terms of innovation and quality. In 2011, the political sphere will have at its disposal much more improved services, an increase in a number of professionals and service providers, and a population that is far much more at ease with mobile phones than it has ever been in all the 17 years they have existed in Uganda.

The Tension RadioKatwe.com Stirred

In 2006, at the height of campaigns for Uganda's presidency, a website called RadioKatwe.com emerged containing damning tell-all articles and commentaries about Yoweri Museveni, the incumbent and leading favourite candidate, and those close to him. As one analyst has noted of the website, the nature of the stories suggested they originated from people in "high places" (Onyango-Obbo, 2007). Museveni had, by 2006, been in power for 20 years and his lead challenger, Kizza Besigye, had once been his personal physician during the 1981-85 guerilla war, which Museveni had started. Later after the war, Besigye had become a minister and chief political commissar for the ruling National Resistance Movement party, among other postings, before he fell out with Museveni in the late 1990s and first challenged him for the presidency in 2001.

The website takes its name after a type of communication that emerged in the 1960s in face of strict state control of the media and restriction to free expression. In an interview for this thesis, B.B. Illakut, the head of the mass communication department at Uganda Christian University with 41 years experience in journalism, explained how back then,

If you were not printing *The Uganda Argus* [the government-owned newspaper] or *The People* [a newspaper belonging to the main opposition party] you could not access the government printer. So you would go to Katwe where some people had Linotype and printers there and would print you. The Linotypes were given out by Germany after World War II because their technology had advanced and they wanted to discard the old technology (Illakut, 2009).

As a result, a forum formed around the Katwe area "where people talk[ed] about everything and anything blocked out of the mainstream [media]." In that time, Katwe was an outlying area on the fringes of the main city centre. But today, following the city's

growth and expansion, Katwe is right at the heart of the central business district. It is home to cutting edge artisanship and technological replication and has etched itself into the national consciousness as a metaphor for ingenuity.

The website promised in its tagline to stop at nothing to tell the truth. However, its interpretation of truth went only as far as going after and exposing President Yoweri Museveni and members of his inner political circle, many of whom are related to him. It neither had any apologies nor disguised this imbalance in the way it presented its information. The people⁶ who run Radio Katwe felt the mainstream media had acquiesced to the government and were in turn covering for it. Therefore, they deemed it their duty to pick up what others were intentionally dropping or neglecting. One exchange perfectly illustrates this thinking and it is instructive to quote at length.

On January 11, 2009, a reader identifying himself as Watson Mukiibi sent in the following comment:

All the years I have been reading your articles, I have never read any constructive thing that you write about this country. Its all critizm (sic) of the current regime. Ugandan politics is like that if another regime come to power you would still criticize (sic) it the same way. We want you to talk about issues that help us as a nation we are not interested in your politicating (sic).

To which the editor cynically replied, “Dear sir, the editor pledges to publish your article telling us the miracles and wonders the current regime has done for us. So please, start writing now.” (RadioKatwe, 2009). Two days later, on January 13, there were four harsh responses to Mukiibi’s comment with one person, only identified as Maggie, noting how

⁶ Both the site’s editor and the web administrator did not return a number of my emails requesting interviews with them. Analysis of their philosophy is made through analyzing content on Radio Katwe, comments from and exchanges with their readers as well as comments from people interviewed during research for this thesis.

“criticism by the various people means there is something lacking” (RadioKatwe, 2009) to suggest that Radio Katwe was justified in the content it published.

Then on January 15, Mukiibi wrote again, in response to these comments,

...All I was asking for is balanced reporting, even when you have a rebellious (sic) child at home, there are good things that you may appreciate about him/her. Their (sic) may be wrongs that this Government has done but the fact is there are good things too, however small. Most of the critiques have been in the same government and used it as a platform to achieve the little or all they have but why should this go on like there has never been good at all.

To this the editor replied,

...we understand your desire, but think it is misplaced. At Radio Katwe we try our best with the limited skills to tell people news that cannot be got anywhere else. Blaming us for not being balanced is like going to a Chinese restaurant and complaining that their menu is lousy because they don't serve *matooke* [a staple food in most of the central and western parts of Uganda].

You can get all the good news and alleged 'miracles' M7/NRM has done for Ugandans if you know where to look. Just remember that there are so many things governments hide from you, what you sometimes read here is nothing. Maybe you should be writing to other Ugandan media and complaining why they don't publish those things. Are they not being unfair to you the news reader by deliberately withholding some information?

If a thief comes to your home, steals property and cuts you on the head but luckily you survive, it sounds strange to say he is a good thief because even though he cut you but at least he didn't finish you off. Ugandans are not slaves to the government, we pay taxes so that they provide services like roads, schools and hospitals. It is our right, not a favour to be eternally grateful for. In this case, thanking is at everyone's discretion, not a law (RadioKatwe, 2009).

With this 'no-holds-barred' approach, Radio Katwe “went for Museveni and his family, publishing highly damaging and embarrassing allegations and insider scoops on Museveni's personal life” (Kalyegira 2009), such as details of infidelity scandals and power fights within Museveni's inner circles. These stories won the website both

admiration, from those who got a kick out of the stories' levels of sensationalism, and criticism, from those who demanded verification for the allegations the website made, the absence of which led them to accuse it of being highly sensationalist.

In spite of the criticism, Radio Katwe “became so hugely popular during the elections, [that] at one point it crashed under the volume of the hundreds of thousands [of people] who were logging in to read [the information it carried]” (Onyango-Obbo, 2007). And as the site “became the talking point about Uganda” both within and outside the country, “the government tried – unwisely and unsuccessfully – to block it” (Ibid.). It asked the US-based firm that hosted the website, the Uganda Communication Commission, a government regulator, and all local Internet Service Providers (ISPs), to block the site because it, “was publishing malicious and false information against the [ruling] party and its presidential candidate” (Vision Reporter, 2006). All but the hosting company in the U.S. duly complied with the government’s orders. But in its defence against these allegations, the website’s administrator was quoted thus, “If what we publish are fabrications, why doesn’t someone want you to hear them? All lies eventually collapse under their own weight, right?” (Vision Reporter, 2006)

Unsure whether everyone else was able to read it, the website’s administrators routed it through a proxy website and started a blog as well. In addition, hundreds of people outside Uganda who still accessed the website started circulating its contents by email, which, in turn, got further circulated within the country as friends and colleagues forwarded them to those they thought had not received them yet. As a result, “The attempt to block RadioKatwe, therefore, probably increased the circulation of its stories tenfold” and at one time during that period it was suggested that there were “probably

more copies of Radio Katwe doing the rounds in Uganda today, than the street sales of *Daily Monitor* and *New Vision* [newspapers] combined” (Onyango-Obbo, 2007). *Daily Monitor* and *New Vision* are the largest circulating newspapers in Uganda averaging about 55,000-60,000 copies in total every day. The government’s attempts, and partial success, in blocking the website catapulted it into the international spotlight as an example of emerging restriction of free speech online in sub-Saharan Africa (Reporters Without Borders, 2006).

Situating Radio Katwe within the Ugandan media environment

Of all mainstream news publications, RadioKatwe.com compares only to the *Red Pepper*. A lot of these publications’ stories are usually one-sided and difficult to verify since they never indicate, in any way, how they were sourced. Yet the *Red Pepper*, like the more credible publications, can claim more diverse content, has a known physical address, is run by known, well-educated, trained and experienced journalists and is an entity focused primarily on making profit, none of which can be said of Radio Katwe. The website’s undisguised biases and hard-to-verify stories grossly belie its tagline as the place to go to in search of any truth or facts. *Red Pepper* on the other hand, has evolved in the almost 10 years it has been in print such that while its news can still be sensational and frighteningly graphic, people have got used to it and so the validity of its stories is questioned less frequently.

Radio Katwe had one advantage over *Red Pepper*, as well as all other mainstream publications. By being completely online and hosted outside Uganda, it was not limited by format, as newspapers are, or by geography or legal strictures because it operated in a

territory that was not subject to Ugandan laws (Onyango-Obbo, 2007). As such, in one of its two significant contributions, the site exploited the difficulty associated with maintaining control in the virtual world, even for countries with enormous resources to do so and few legal constraints as deterrents. Regardless of the nature of its content, it can be credited as being the first to clearly demonstrate that the state's structures of media control and expression could be outmanoeuvred. As shall be clear later, some publications that regard as their greatest risk the threats of closure by the state have been inspired by Radio Katwe to invest more in their websites as a counter strategy against state restrictions.

There have been other cases in Africa besides Uganda's where the Internet has served similar purposes. For instance, during the Kenya presidential elections crisis in December 2007-January 2008, when the government slapped a three-day ban on all media from reporting on the outcome of the elections, "digitally networked technologies, specifically mobile phones and the Internet, were a catalyst to both predatory behaviour such as ethnic-based mob violence and to civic behaviour such as citizen journalism and human rights campaigns" (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008). Different groups sent out ethnically-charged text messages inciting one tribe against another. Yet others used the same mechanism to repudiate these messages and also point out areas that were safe to escape to for protection (Ibid.).

In a similar crisis in Zimbabwe in 2008 there was a sharp uptake of new information technologies when the government's shutdown of all but its own media houses because they offered the only lifeline to access information the government was

blocking as well as to disseminate it. As the founding editor of the once popular but now closed daily newspaper the *Daily News* noted,

If it wasn't for the new media technologies – the Internet to be precise – the Zimbabwe Times [the paper he formed in exile in the U.S.] would not exist. Our paper is entirely web-based. Our correspondents file their copy mostly by email; occasionally they file by phone. So, indeed, while media space continues to shrink in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Times has managed to bypass or evade stringent government controls because of its lofty position on the Internet, beyond the reach of government (Geoffrey Nyarota in Nyaira 2009, p.8).

Radio Katwe can also be credited for popularizing crowd-sourcing and eliciting the crowd, two aspects that have become synonymous with new media in general as embodied by the Internet, in Uganda. The website was the first in the country to encourage its readers to submit stories and commentaries about political goings on that they were familiar with regarding, what the site deemed as, the rot in Museveni and his government. On other occasions, it put out a post about an issue and asked its readers to contribute any information they had in regard to it. Proponents of new media platforms have argued (see Chapter Two) that engaging audiences in these ways makes them feel well-regarded, appreciated and part of the reporting process both as consumers as well as the producers of information.

Mainstream publications have not taken to crowd-sourcing in any significant way other than to encourage comments to their online stories, encouraging their audiences to alert them about newsworthy events wherever they are, and a blog at the *Independent*, a weekly newsmagazine, that is open to public contributions. However, there was much indication throughout the research that it is something they were seriously considering. For that reason, it may only be a matter of time before they adapt it.

Admittedly, there has not been another website or citizen-based platform that has achieved similar or even close popularity and success like Radio Katwe. Several of them started and “tried to fill in the sort of classified information that Radio Katwe specialized in but they often lacked writers and content and by the end of 2009, the public's interest had still not been aroused by these Europe and North America-based online publications” (Uganda Record, 2009). Unfortunately, even Radio Katwe has failed to sustain its popularity or even the expectations it stirred up. Although it remained online, it all but lost its vigour and bite. Save for the first 20 days of 2009, the website went throughout the whole year without a single update.

It is hard to determine the website’s unusual slackening especially given the fact that *its management declined all requests for interviews. That said, for all the excitement* it stirred up, one of Radio Katwe’s major flaws was that it neither identified individual authors or editors, as it still does not, nor were the stories and commentaries hardly edited. As such, it became difficult to know how much of the stories it carried were true, a factor that drew much criticism, even if, ironically, it has been noted that its contributor base grew tremendously to include, as already noted, “many volunteers in high places” (Onyango-Obbo, 2007).

Another factor to explain its slackening can be traced in an overconcentration on a single issue: Museveni and his inner circle; pegging itself to a momentary event, the general elections; becoming popular in large part because of the government’s ill-advised attempts and partial success to block it and failing to make the transition after the elections or to find other sustainable ways of leveraging its popularity by, for instance, expanding its scope of coverage.

This narrow focusing, however, is not totally unique to Radio Katwe or Uganda. It reflects a general characteristic of such citizen-based or online reporting enterprises. In the U.S., for instance, where the Internet has had the most impact on mainstream media and journalism in general, and where extensive research has been done on citizen-based media, the latest research there indicates that although citizens became an even larger part of the daily news information flow in 2008, “citizen news sites remain relatively rare. Among those that do exist, the range of topics is narrower and the sourcing somewhat thinner than on legacy news sites, and the content is generally not updated, even on a daily basis” (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).

That being said, these enterprises are anything but unimportant and cannot therefore be easily dismissed or neglected. In some of their enduring contributions, they have succeeded in shaking up the hegemony of mainstream media, right now mostly in North America, Europe and other economically advanced countries, although this will spread fast to other parts of the world as their Internet connectivity levels and online culture increase. Together with blogs, they have literally given far more people the ability to “actually turn their words and ideas into published form”, they have enabled anyone to “have at least a small audience” and anyone “who desires a broad hearing can at least be armed to fight for one” (Kline & Burstein, 2005, p. xv). If in the future, journalism ends up being highly segmented and customized, as it is increasingly shaping up to be, citizen-based initiatives and blogs will be credited for heralding that transition.

The Real Transformation: Readers Migrate Online

More critically for Uganda, however, and perhaps the only aspect in which it compares fairly with the developed world, where new media is commonplace, is the fast-growing numbers of people who visit the online editions of newspapers in comparison to those who actually buy the hard copies. It is worth noting that most news publications in Uganda appeal to the same readership.

According to many of those interviewed for this thesis, the number of people within Uganda visiting the newspapers' online editions has significantly increased and overtaken that of visitors from outside Uganda who previously comprised the largest percentage. For instance, at the *New Vision*, Uganda's largest circulating paper, there are between 30,000 and 37,000 daily visitors to its online edition, compared to about 31,000 print edition copies that are sold every day. Currently, 30 percent of these visitors are from within Uganda (Apedel, 2009; New Vision, 2010).

These numbers, however, are not unique to *New Vision* as they reflect, fairly well, the statistics at the other publications. For example, at the *Independent*, a weekly newsmagazine, which although a major publication has the lowest circulation among all the major publications in this study, out of a total of 7,000 unique visitors a day, between 3,000-4,000 are from Uganda, and in general 40 per cent of all the total visitors to their website are from Uganda (Mwenda, 2009). In contrast, only on very few occasions has the magazine sold more than 7,000 print copies of any single weekly edition.

Radio Katwe can be credited for triggering this exodus online for the simple reason that, unlike other publications, one could only access it on the Web. The website lifted the veil off the real possibility of the Internet as a source of news and information.

The question then became: If one could access Radio Katwe online, why could they not do the same with the other publications? After all, Ugandan newspapers do not have purely online editions. Rather, discounting adverts and other commercial notices, they reproduce online exactly what they published in print, sometimes with all the factual and grammatical errors.

This migration of news consumers online poses the most serious challenge to existing news media than the emergence of citizen-based online reporting enterprises like Radio Katwe. This challenge is financial, given that most news media entities are profit oriented, since the migration lowers newspaper circulation and therefore reduces their (mainstream media) revenue. Currently, online news all over the world remains largely free in the absence of an effective business model.

In Uganda, people who read the news online do so mainly because it makes more economic sense. Here is why: Out of the estimated 2.5 million people who have access to the Internet in Uganda (Internet Usage Statistics, 2009), many of them access it through commercial Internet cafes. There is a significant number who access it from their places of work at no extra cost. Far fewer people have Internet in their homes. The largest percentage of people who have access to the Internet, particularly those who pay for it, are the same demographic that can potentially afford to buy a newspaper.

By going online, however, these people get more value from the same amount of money they would have spent buying a newspaper because they can read not only one but virtually all newspapers even as they simultaneously surf the Internet for other things they might be interested. Internet users are known to view multiple pages at the same time. The average cost of a newspaper in Uganda is Ush1500, about US75 cents. For the

same amount of money, one gets on average 50 minutes of Internet access. For people with less disposable incomes, as would be the case with the majority in Uganda, the possibility of acquiring more value for the same amount as they would have spent on a newspaper is an irresistible attraction. This analysis, coupled with the growing number of visitors to newspapers' online editions, suggests there are people who are choosing not to buy newspapers and instead to access them online, which, in turn, lowers circulation and reduces the newspapers' revenue.

News executives are aware of this shift to online editions. As Daniel Kalinaki, managing editor of *Daily Monitor*, acknowledged,

The Internet has...driven traditional readers, who would buy the paper, to read it free online...As more people have access to the Internet, they are less willing to spend money to buy what they can get free. All the main newspapers in Uganda have seen a dip in circulation. It's only the tabloids that have seen an increase because they are in niche markets and they appeal to the lowest common denominator; sex, gossip and crime (2009).

Timothy Kalyegira, editor of the online-only *Uganda Record*, elaborated more about this,

The more urbanization we get and when broadband Internet connectivity is finally here and fully operational, which is the direction we are taking, any hopes of these newspapers ever selling a consistent number of copies, say 40,000 and above that, is to be forgotten. If it never happened in the 1990s it will never happen again because the new generation of readers have grown up with an understanding of news online. It might not cause the papers to start closing down but we shall certainly witness major transformations (2009).

For now, however, there is still relief. Only a tiny fraction of the population has access to the Internet and as Kalyegira noted, "To a larger extent, the average person, advertiser and public official still thinks of the newspaper in its physical form. People

still think of the Internet in distant terms; it being out there without any attachment to their daily lives except for sending and receiving emails” (2009). Internet penetration levels in the country remain abysmally very low. Generally, the Internet is mostly limited to the capital city and a few busy urban centres and the cost of access is still astronomically high, one of the reasons it has not reached a critical mass. The other reasons include shortage of electricity, access to computers as well as the requisite skills to operate them, and the fact that other common uses of the Internet, such as online shopping, banking, trading, have yet to be introduced.

Those who temper enthusiasm for new information technologies in places like Uganda emerging as viable alternative platforms to channel critical viewpoints draw on such statistics to reinforce their argument. However, as has already been argued (see Chapter One and Two), newspaper circulation, by comparison, is not significantly greater than the level of Internet penetration. Yet that, or even the fact they are mainly accessed by the elite, has not deterred them from being influential. The same argument can be made for the Internet. Moreover, the relief the current state of the Internet gives is very transient. The general consensus from the people interviewed for this thesis is that as it is, the Internet has already changed the landscape in very significant ways and poses serious challenges to existing media.

For instance, smaller publications that hardly make money off their online editions have to find new strategies to shore up their copy sales. As Andrew M. Mwenda, managing editor of the *Independent*, said, “[New media technologies] offer a competitive threat in the sense that even us when we publish a magazine it is not uploaded immediately online. We wait until Tuesday when we think people have bought the hard

copy [before we upload it online].” The reasons they do this, as he explained it, are, “Right now Internet advertising in Uganda is grossly underdeveloped compared to the West and wrongly so; the Ugandan advertising market is still obsessed with the product on the street yet the product on the web might give them better reach. They underestimate Ugandans visiting online news sites” (2009).

Bigger publications, however, do not necessarily have such online advertising constraints. The Internet has created a new advertising platform on the online edition and so for them it is a trade-off. At the *New Vision*, for instance, Sam Apedel, the paper’s web manager, noted that even though the hard copy newspaper remains the cash cow, “last year [2008] website advertising went up by 11 percent.” And because of that, the site is “becoming one of our fastest growing areas and it is being taken seriously.” The site, he added, is increasingly becoming centrally integrated in the company and “there is more money in this year’s [2009] budget to develop the website” and other related new communications like short message services (SMS) that the paper intends to use to integrate all the media platforms (2009).

In more broader and long-term strategies aimed at significantly transforming the company in general, plans are underway to overhaul the overall structure of the *New Vision* through investments in an all encompassing content management system that will link the whole chain of media platforms so everybody is plugged in to what is happening and also to ensure a smooth flow of information. As Apedel explained,

Many things are going to change including the seating arrangement which we would like to be centralized around the different platforms editors instead of having these people far removed from one another. We are investing in software that will make all this possible so that we work as a team and not competitors. There will be such

contentious issues such as who owns a scoop, but those are minor. We are also currently undergoing some structural readjustment so that people can sit together and work together and not as separate teams (2009).

It is not only *New Vision* that considers its website important and so treats it as such. Almost all newspapers are, in different ways, for different reasons and according to their means, making significant financial investments and structural changes to match the new reality the Internet has introduced. Nowhere is this more marked than at *Daily Monitor*. As Daniel Kalinaki, the paper's managing editor, noted,

We are going through a transformation. MPL [Monitor Publications Limited] started as a newspaper company and it was good for its time. When you look at the demographics, you realize young people want to access their information in different formats. So what we're doing is to change the way we deliver this information. So what is generally happening is an evolution from a newspaper company to an information company (2009).

Three years ago, in 2007, the company launched an E-paper, a digital version of the paper in print, which as Edward Ssekalo, its former online editor, said in an interview for this thesis, was "part of the broader NMG [Nation Media Group, the parent company] plan to address 'leakage' resulting from people turning to online versions" (2009). He added how about the same time the paper also launched Monitor Mobile, a mobile phone application that lets subscribers access the newspaper's headlines and short snippets of news articles on their cell phones. Originally, Monitor Mobile was meant as an advertising initiative to drive up the paper's sales but now, and going ahead, plans are to strengthen and market it as one of the different formats the paper plans to deliver its news and information. As Kalinaki explained, "We think our job should be to gather

information, process it and distribute it through different channels on mobile phones, email, and Internet. Some of it will be free and some on demand” (2009).

Beyond Online Migration: The Other Transformations

In one of its other rather obvious, but nonetheless significant contributions, the Internet, and mobile phones have improved the speed of communication through email. As Kalyegira noted,

20 years ago, the closest to email would have been fax messages or express letters or even walking or travelling to each and everyone’s location. So imagine the time that has been reduced. And that’s just email. There is a faster way than email, which is a text message [on the phone] that even if a journalist is really broke and can’t access the Internet [he or she] can send a message. It has simplified communication in quite unimaginable ways. You can send information to a block of people who would reply to you immediately without troubling to find the fax machines and ensure that it is in good working condition (2009).

He has added how, “another advantage that’s rarely acknowledged is the function of cataloguing; the fact that it’s simply like a postal address to send and receive information but it is also storage, you can easily go back to past conversations/communications with much convenience that it makes it a mini workstation.”

In close relation to this is the efficiency in gathering, processing and disseminating information. As Samuel N. Gummah, the national director of Uganda Radio Network, put it, “the process of collecting information, that is investigating, interviewing and corroborating, is strenuous enough that the processing and dissemination of that information shouldn’t add an extra strain” (2009).

The Internet has drastically reduced the time it takes to gather information because as Kalyegira noted, every Internet-connected computer is a research tool. “Previously the number of people you would have asked for even the slightest information has all been done away with by a quick search online. The many government and non-government organizations websites available provides so much information at the finger tip that otherwise would have required a lot of time, money and effort to obtain” (2009). This, as George Lugalambi, the head of the mass communication department at Makerere University, Uganda’s oldest and premier university, noted in an interview for this thesis, has made it “possible for a journalist to do up to 50 percent of the stories even before they step out of the newsroom because usually half of the stories are background information” (2009).

In the era of typewriters, as Edward Ojulu, the acting managing editor of the bi-weekly *Observer* newspaper, noted, searching for background information was so difficult and time consuming as it required going to the library for newspaper cuttings that reporters started working around it by not bothering with background information at all. “But now within the comfort of your desk [equipped with a computer connected with Internet] while you edit a story you call pull up tonnes of background [information] about it [making] the work easier and faster” (2009).

These observations, while true, need to be tempered by the fact that a lot of websites contain the most basic information about their organizations, which most times for journalists is not useful. It is the tendency of almost all organizations, whether public or private, not to post on their websites any piece of information they would like to keep away from the public. Even for organizations with a lot of information on their websites,

these websites are usually designed in complex way so as to hold this information.

Navigating them for it is therefore no easy task. It requires both time and a specific set of skills.

According to Lugalambi, the Internet has amplified the journalist's "ability to double check their information from their sources either from databases, government information or other information repositories online" (Lugalambi, 2009). But Kalinaki, the managing editor of *Daily Monitor* disagrees, noting that "it is very easy to find information [online] but harder to verify it" (2009).

Together with this difficulty in verifying online information is a strong feeling that with all its unmatched potential and benefits, the Internet has not fundamentally improved or changed journalism as a craft. It is not being fully used to improve the quality of work. On the contrary, as many respondents noted, it seems more to be breeding laziness. For Timothy Kalyegira, researcher and editor of the online-only *Uganda Record*, Ugandan newspapers have yet to reflect that we are in the Internet age. In his view, the ocean of information that the Internet is remains vastly untapped. "If you looked at all the newspapers...You don't get the richness of the Internet in the stories and articles written. Our training and orientation has yet to catch up with the advantages it creates" (Kalyegira, 2009).

In a number of places, as Ojulu, acting managing editor of the bi-weekly *Observer*, noted, "Young staffers don't like to use the Internet, for instance, to support research and enhance their stories. A lot of time is spent on social networking sites for leisure and not to verify anything" (Ojulu, 2009). Lugalambi lamented the "lack of originality in many news organisations. The smarter ones pick ideas while others don't

even do enough to turn the material around, improve it and give it a new context. There have also been cases of plagiarism” (2009). And for Pius M. Katunzi, the business development editor at the *Observer*, for some journalists, “any information they find online they don’t crosscheck it, forgetting that there are people online who throw information there for the sake of it” (2009).

In an interview for this thesis, Rachel Mugarura, the editor-in-chief of Uganda Radio Network, noted more eloquently how, “We are not tapping into it to improve our craft, to do any better research, to create networks. We aren’t using it to reach a broader audience. It’s more of a transformation from one platform of the media to the other” (2009). While from a business angle, and as the failure of RadioKatwe.com demonstrates, Andrew M. Mwenda has added that the Internet has not introduced a “purely online news organization in Uganda whose primary objective is to make money off its online sales rather than the street copy” (2009). Even *Uganda Record* has failed to attract advertising. Instead, the Internet has established new platforms that only traditional media have found themselves well suited to fully exploit (Ibid.).

Towards Participation, Free Expression and Democracy

For mainly privately-owned and relatively independent publications that perceive political threats to be greater than say, for instance, low and declining circulation levels, their online editions serve a universal purpose to avoid such threats and obstacles. Some of the major investments and changes that are underway are precisely meant to address these threats. At the *Independent*, for example, which has been raided twice and had some of its staffers arrested and a slew of charges brought against them, Andrew M.

Mwenda, its managing editor, noted that, “Primarily, the Internet insulates us from closure. We can continue to exercise the same influence, to do exactly the news that we do even when we are not allowed selling on the streets of Kampala. We are online because it takes us beyond government censorship” (2009).

As such, publications like *Independent* are making investments that are intended to insulate them from their biggest threat: the state. These include mainly in reliable software, hardware and human resources, strengthening the security features on their website to limit or minimize hackers who might want to post false information on the site in order to damage the publication’s credibility, digital equipment that will enable them to work from anywhere in the country in the event their premises are shut down, and well-trained reporters capable of operating this equipment to file stories from wherever in the country they find themselves.

As Radio Katwe proved, and as George Lugalambi noted, “It is not as easy to interfere with information online as it is with newspapers because there it multiplies extremely fast by the time even those monitoring it get to realize. Interestingly, it goes around the Web and gets back into the papers and on air, [which] is an opportunity” (2009). The Ugandan government has yet to prove its capacity to block information on the Internet as countries like China have. But even then, as the Chinese case has demonstrated, it is impossible to achieve a complete blockade of information online because of the various means the Internet enables its dissemination.

Ironically, in the same way the Internet is an invaluable weapon against state restrictions to the media, it is also a serious challenge to the news process and broadly to democracy. As already highlighted in the introductory chapter, and as George Lugalambi

of Makerere University mass communication department noted, both the Net and mobile phones are easily susceptible to abuse, meaning that ill-intentioned people can easily disseminate utter falsehoods and misinformation, which would spread as fast as useful information would. Radio Katwe offers a very clear example of this. The content they published mostly attacked, slandered and abused Museveni yet it moved around very fast and created more animosity than it advanced any meaningful debate in Uganda.

For that reason, whereas new information technologies are not only vital but are actually extending the horizon for free expression and a free media, it might not be enough to desire and demand these freedoms. It is equally vital to be concerned about the nature of content and debate that these technologies enable. If, as Mwenda has noted, these freedoms are used, “to purvey a huge tonne of lies and misinformation it means the mainstream voter will either opt out and won’t rely on the media so the media won’t be performing that function of [delivering true and timely] information” (2009) in which case democracy will not be served.

The challenge for new media platforms, as well as the old, is a very old one: “to build a respected platform that can directly influence public policy and decision makers,” the kind where, “what you write cannot be torn to shreds” (Mwenda, 2009). In the absence of this, all the potential new media platforms are endowed with will remain unexploited. As Rachel Mugarura, editor-in-chief of Uganda Radio Network, noted eloquently,

If we can develop journalism to such a state that what is offered on the Internet is either in-depth or of a far superior quality than what I get on radio or through the newspapers perhaps then I see it grow. If it offers an alternative view or goes to sections of society that are not covered by traditional media, perhaps. But if I have the same blogger

covering parliament the same way the papers, radio and TV cover, I don't really see why anyone should bother...(2009).

The next chapter focuses on the same central questions attended to in this chapter but with relation to mobile phones. As noted in the introductory chapter, the Internet and mobile phones have different levels of penetration (there are approximately 2.5 million Internet users in Uganda against approximately 10 million who have access to mobile phones) and, therefore, different impacts, which is why they are discussed separately. Moreover, with the explosion of FM radio stations, people with mobile phones also have access to radio since most mobile phones have in-built radio systems.

CHAPTER FIVE

FM RADIO, MOBILE PHONES, TEXT MESSAGING AND THE AGE OF PARTICIPATION

This chapter builds on the discussion from the previous chapter by exploring the same central questions with regards to mobile phones. The discussion here places more emphasis on citizen participation, the role of the mobile phone in enhancing free expression on a broader public level, enabling alternative communication platforms, and promoting aspects of democracy that are congruent with it such as increasing and diversifying voices and views, and enhancing checks and accountability.

As has already been discussed (see Chapter Two), much has been said and written about mobile phones in Africa, some of which is factual while some clearly suggest an overestimation of the impact of these communication devices. Factually, no other technology has, and continues to, spread as rapidly as mobile phones. There are claims that more people in Uganda, for instance, are connected to mobile phones, in the 17 years they have been around, than those with electricity, which has been around for over five decades. The current number of mobile phone users, estimated at 9.5 million, is expected to double by 2012 (IRIN, 2009; Cnet, 2009; Gosier, 2009).

The rapid growth in mobile connections followed a series of cost-lowering innovations on the part of telecom operators, particularly the introduction of pre-paid billing and low-cost handsets, which made the mobile phone much more affordable by a lot of people. For most of the users there is another motivation: the mobile phone also provides them with their first ever access to telecommunications. This, undoubtedly, is a transformation without comparison. Yet the discourse about these communication

devices has largely been cast in revolutionary terms: it is the magic catalyst that has been missing in the fight against and eradication of poverty; with capacity to catapult Africa to its rightful place, which it has hitherto struggled, unsuccessfully, to come into (Economist, 2005; LaFraniere, 2005; Corbett, 2008; West, 2008).

The discourse about mobile phones has been least interested, if at all, in the intersection between mobile phones and news media, or even more generally with FM radio. One of the reasons that might explain this is the overconcentration on the digital divide and consequently the focus on increasing access to new information technologies at the expense of what users are doing with these technologies.

The intersection between FM radio and mobile phones is particularly an interesting one. Radio is the source of news for a majority of people in Uganda, particularly those in rural areas who do not have access to other sources of information. People tend to base some of their daily conversations on what they heard over the radio. As forms of new media, insofar as being recently introduced, mobile phones and FM radio have evolved together and now reinforce each other. Radio programming is highly interactive in order to attract more participation from listeners. In turn, more participation boosts a radio station's ratings because increases its percentage of listenership, all of which translates well financially. It is difficult to fully appreciate one without looking at the other.

Whereas there are generally no reliable studies about Uganda's media audiences, interest is slowly growing in FM radio particularly in regard to the form, depth and extent of citizen engagement and participation either by tuning in and/or calling and making contributions to the various radio programs. There are, for instance, studies that focus on

political participation in radio talk shows as well as open-air roundtable debates, locally known as Ebimeeza, which are broadcast live on radio (Mwesige, 2004; Nassanga, 2008).

These studies, however, concentrate on the least amount of radio programming, meaning that the majority of the airtime, which is divided mainly into entertainment and social discussions, remains unexplored. Although political talk shows are a main feature of FM radio in Uganda, a number of radio stations devote just one hour to them during weekdays, while others devote two hours, mostly on Saturday. The concentration, so far, of studies on political programs might suggest that political expression has a higher premium over non-political expression. However, different expressions serve different purposes and for that reason this thesis considers all forms of expression to possess equal importance.

Since there are no studies that give a clear-cut demographic profile of a typical radio caller, research for this thesis, as the introductory chapter noted, identified ten of the more popular radio stations in Kampala, where the research was conducted. The ten stations were selected by looking at newspaper advertorials that some stations run comparing themselves with the rest to make the claim that they were the most listened to. The actual research reports from which these advertorials were derived were not readily available.

From each of these stations, the five most regular callers were identified and a short guided questionnaire administered to each one of them in an attempt to capture, albeit not in a scientific manner, the profile of a typical radio caller. Six of these callers declined to participate for personal reasons and so were excluded right at the beginning, while for the rest, all their questionnaires were valid. The questionnaire sought to

establish the following from respondents: their age, gender, education; source of income; ownership and frequency of use of mobile phones; reasons why they call or send text messages into radio stations; if they believed mobile phones could emerge as alternative communication spaces; and their role in promoting democracy.

The findings from this survey are discussed only as they pertain to the people who were involved. They are not generalized for everyone else who uses their phones to call or send messages into radio stations or other news outlets. However, they provide reliable insight into the general pattern in the way people engage news media. I have taken into account additional responses from follow-up probing and I supplement the results of the survey with other in-depth interviews that were conducted for the research.

This chapter also treats as an extended example, as will be discussed in detail later on, the campaign to save part of Mabira Natural Forest Reserve. Largely driven by environmental non-governmental organizations, the campaign relied, among other strategies, on text messaging to rally the public against the government's plan to give away 71 hectares, or one-quarter, of the forest to the Sugar Corporation of Uganda Ltd (SCOUL). This sugar-producing company had asked the government, which is a joint owner, for more land claiming it was needed to expand production.

Text messaging, as the following discussion reveals, was given high priority among all communication strategies, and went on to be highly effective, mainly because a lot of people in Uganda already use it in their contemporary communication, whether between two people or among groups of people. In fact, the high usage of text messaging has enabled the emergence of a rapid growing and vibrant sub-sector of short message service providers who mainly offer web-to-phone message services. One area in which

text messaging has been highly used is in sending out wedding/marriage-related notices. It is also increasingly being used to advertise different products.

As with Radiokatwe.com in the previous chapter, this campaign's methods and utilization of mobile phones and the Internet speaks generally to the impact new technologies are having on news and information in Uganda. To be sure, the campaign began independent of news media. Yet, as George Lugalambi, head of the mass communication department at Makerere University, has already noted, the nature of cyberspace is such that information goes around the web and gets back into the papers and on air (Lugalambi, 2009). This indeed is what happened with the anti-Mabira campaign. The mainstream media caught on and intensified their coverage after the campaign had received massive public support, which not only reinforces the interconnectedness of new technologies and news media but also the impact of the former on the latter.

This is not to say mobile phones have not had immediate and direct impact on news media. As with the Internet, they have tremendously improved efficiency, in reporting in real time and have founded new experiences that as B.B. Illakut, head of the mass communication department at Uganda Christian University, noted, "some of us [the old generation] are appalled that now you can get in touch with anybody in any part of the world from wherever you are. It is amazing. For the new generation who have been born and brought up with these changes, they think that is how it has always been but for us it is a complete revolution" (2009).

From about 260,000 telephones lines in the whole country at the beginning of 1990 to over ten million today, Sam Guma, the national director of Uganda Radio

Network, has noted the mobile phone as “the single most technology that has contributed to journalism and mass media in Uganda.” He has added that the availability and proliferation of mobile phones all across Uganda has made the country “so quite accessible that the face of journalism has changed almost instantly.” Mobile phones have integrated so well in daily news operations that they now rank in importance, if not more so, with the traditional journalist’s kit: notebook, pen and recorder (and still and visual cameras for photojournalists or television reporters respectively). Recounting an experience from the pre-mobile phone era, Guma noted how,

In the mid to late 1990s, it was possible to run a story as old as three or four days coming from a place as close as 243kms and it would still be news. That can no longer happen. The proliferation of mobile phones makes it possible to report events in the same day they happened in any part of the country. Journalism has thus transformed itself on account of these technologies...so tremendously that for some younger entrants into the industry it is almost impossible for them to imagine working without access to these technologies (2009).

Prelude to a Scandal

In October 2005, SCOUL, a subsidiary of Mehta Group, asked the government for more land to expand its sugar production and generate more electricity. The 86-year-old SCOUL, which Mehta owns jointly with the Ugandan government, is the oldest and smallest, in terms of output, of the three sugar producing companies in Uganda. It averages 55,000 tonnes every year, which it claimed it would double if it acquired more land. The company is located adjacent to Mabira Central Forest Reserve, which is one of Uganda’s largest surviving natural forests. Besides its ecological importance, it is also home to 312 endangered species of trees, 287 bird species and 199 butterfly species. Both

SCOUL and Mabira are located in the eastern district of Jinja, some 54 Kms away from the capital Kampala (Mutagamba, 2007; Ojambo, 2010; Cocks, 2006).

The timing of the request could not have been any more politically risky. President Museveni was campaigning for re-election and, as Keith Child has noted, “foresaw that public reaction might pose a potential threat to his party’s election prospects” (Child, 2009). It was not until almost a year later, in August 2006, that there was “the first public indication that the government intended to degazette [that is, to formally free up]...7,100 hectares of the reserve to allow SCOUL to plant sugarcane” (Child, 2009). Museveni, who has spent his entire quarter-century presidency to date promoting industrialization, fully endorsed the plan. With opposition streaming in from all sides, Museveni was forced to author an article in the *New Vision* explaining as his reasons for his endorsement, “the urgent need for industrializing our very backward but rich country in terms of natural resources and raw materials” (2007).

This was not the first time the government was giving forest land to industry. It was not the first either for Mehta Group to request part of Mabira for expansion. The company has previously received some forest land for similar purposes (Ibid.). Moreover, in 2006 the government gave away huge swathes of the pristine rainforest on the island district of Kalangala, in south-central Uganda, to Bidco, a Kenyan palm oil company, which “planted 4,000 hectares (10,000 acres) of palm, mostly on land covered in forest that the company bulldozed” (Cocks, 2007). Although “the state [had] agreed to give Bidco 2,000 more hectares of forest land by lifting the protected status of a nature reserve” the plans were “held up by public outcry” (Ibid.). Before this, the government

had transformed a huge part of Namanve forest, located on the outskirts of Kampala, into an industrial park.

Uganda faces serious environmental threats on account of encroachment on forests and other wetland areas. The country's environmental authority has noted that "Uganda has lost nearly a third of its forests in the last two decades and could lose most of its tree cover in about 40 years unless measures are quickly taken to reverse the situation" (IRIN, 2009). In 1990, Uganda's forest cover exceeded five million hectares. By 2005, only 3.5 million hectares remained, threatened even more by a fast growing but poor population as well as growing commercial demands such as SCOU's (Ibid.).

Save Mabira Campaign, Send a Text Message

The proposal to give away part of Mabira came amidst numerous other arbitrary allotments of prime land and plots to so-called investors, a government action that had attracted a lot of opposition and disquiet. This dissent would become very useful in the campaign to save Mabira. From the time it became clear the government was bent on giving away part of the forest all throughout the first half of 2007, environmental non-government organizations (NGOs), coalescing under the 'Save Mabira Campaign' banner, went to work in cyberspace, publishing informational web pages and ample literature on personal blogs, sending out news alerts, and organizing an online petition, which fast became very popular. As Child has noted,

The widespread use of the Internet and other electronic information technologies was an important tool during the early stages of the protest for disseminating information and organizing resistance, and ultimately led to what has been called "one of Africa's first grassroots modern ecological protest campaigns" (Child, 2009).

Once the heat was on, the mainstream media could no longer remain disinterested or on the sidelines. As Child has added,

By April 2007, it was virtually impossible for an urban Ugandan to pass through a single day without hearing, seeing or reading a radio, TV or newspaper account of Mabira-related events. A visibly frustrated Minister for the Environment, Jessica Eriyo, dismissively accused the media of being manipulated by the protestors (Child, 2009).

There were, of course, many other approaches employed to communicate, raise awareness and mobilize public support for the campaign including public talk shows, public meetings, flyers, T-shirts, calendars and bumper stickers. In short, different approaches served different intentions and targeted different outcomes. However, as Achilles Byaruhanga, the executive director of Nature Uganda, one of the environmental NGOs at the forefront of the campaign, said, in an interview for this thesis, none was as effective as text messaging in terms of mobilization and rallying the public to come out for demonstrations and, particularly, to boycott SCOUL's products, a strategy that turned out to be wildly successful.

Byaruhanga added that, "There was no way to go on radio, for instance, and ask people not to buy sugar [from SCOUL]. It wouldn't work and they [the government] would even take you to court for blackmail or economic sabotage" (2009). It would also have been difficult, let alone very costly, to place advertisements on the hundreds of radio stations in the country (Ibid.). Indeed, as the NGOs predicted, the government eventually issued warnings against whoever was involved in the campaign when SCOUL started reporting a decline in sales. It was noteworthy that the news that people had actually

stopped buying SCOUL's products was spread by radio stations in their news reports and commentaries.

What made text messaging so successful in the Mabira campaign and what does it say about mobile phones in the larger context in engaging citizens, in disseminating information and in bringing about change? The first, and most obvious, reason as Byaruhanga put it, is, "Mobile phones in Uganda are an obsession. Anybody who can afford a mobile phone has got one" (Byaruhanga, 2009). Mobile phones are increasingly becoming the primary address for many people in the country. The rate of subscription is fast and thus difficult to pin down. As of June 2009, mobile phone subscriptions stood at 9.4 million (Uganda Communication Commission, 2009). It is expected to double in a very short period.

Admittedly, some of these subscriptions are held by the same people because "customers in developing countries are far more price-sensitive than people in the rich world" (The Economist, 2009). Their loyalty is first to cost before anything else. So, if it means having two or several SIM (Subscriber Identification Module) cards to take more charge of the call costs, a considerable number of people might acquire more than one SIM card as survey results will reveal later on. Yet this does not in any way negate the obsession with mobile phones. Moreover, even those who cannot afford a mobile phone set of their own still have access to it either through sharing (see Chapter Three) or public phones, which are as widespread as mobile phones that they have become a source of livelihood for a growing number of people and call charges on them are relatively affordable.

Besides calling, text messaging is by far the most popularly used application of the mobile phone. As Byaruhanga added, “People have a craze for text messages, particularly the young and middle-aged people, which make the biggest percentage of the population.” According to him, the combination of the mobile phone obsession and the popularity of text messaging means “you can probably reach between 50-60 percent of people who own phones just by text messaging, which is difficult through other means.” By the numbers, in a space of two years, 2007-2008, mobile phone users sent close to 700 million text messages estimated at Sh86 billion or US\$39.4 million (Balancing Act, 2009). As with ownership of multiple SIM cards, this too is partly a function of cost. A text message costs half the price of a phone call. This, however, does not mean mobile phone users text more than they call. On the contrary, in the same period of time, a total of 3.5 billion minutes were billed, which is equivalent to about Sh1.2 trillion or about US\$600 million (Uganda Communication Commission, 2009).

Text messaging is further advantaged with unique effectiveness. It goes with little saying that it is instantaneous and unlimited by location, that is, you can send texts from anywhere. Text messages are usually precise and explicit, they enable someone to think through and compress their thoughts. They leave little, if any, room for discussion or arguments and demand of the receiver to either take or leave them. They are unique in that every text one receives he or she has to read it, or at least open it before deleting. Texts are not like emails, for instance, which one can easily delete. They are even unlike radio programs, where it is possible to be tuned in without being fully attentive. For those reasons, Byaruhanga argues that, “whoever received that text message at least got the message even if they did not act on it” (2009).

As the Mabira campaign demonstrated, text messaging uniquely enables underground organization away from the purview of any restrictive forces, for instance, the state. As Byaruhanga explained, “We needed to have a system of communication that was not going to particularly isolate either individuals or organizations because if it did, then they would be incarcerated by the government organs. If they knew who was sending out information, then they would easily come for you” (Byaruhanga, 2009). All throughout the campaign, there was no time that those involved with designing and sending out text messages ever met together in a single room. This was very strategic because, as Byaruhanga added, “During the campaign, there was a tendency for the government to say the people who are making noise [that is, voicing objection] are environmentalists. So the government wanted to try and isolate a certain group of people who were behind the entire organization, which is exactly what we were trying to avoid because it would kill the campaign.”

With good planning, as was demonstrated in that campaign, text messaging achieves higher communication results since it makes it possible to clearly identify and reach one’s target as well as build strong networks, which for advocacy causes like the Mabira campaign can be invaluable. Given the intrinsic value of the forest, which, as Byaruhanga noted, is not among the issues average people are concerned about in their daily lives, the campaign started out at an elite level to secure “the support of those who would appreciate the much higher value of the forest and who would understand our objection to give it away for other economic activities.” Once the elite support was assured, the campaign could rely on them for several purposes including piling pressure on the government at a more intellectual and policy level but also to simplify the message

to the less literate and sophisticated citizenry. This, as both Chapter One and Six indicate, underlines the agent role the elite can play given the privileged position that they occupy.

Targeting the elite group directly, comprised largely of people the NGOs involved knew personally, saved time, money and effort. It also created the much-needed web of supporters, which would optimize individual networks and trust built amongst them to spread the campaign's message even farther. It is through this way that people outside the elite group were mobilized and brought into the campaign. According to Byaruhanga, the very first messages went out to no more than 50 people who were left with free rein to either forward the same messages or rewrite them in ways they saw fit to their friends who they knew or would convince to be supportive of the mission. Within a few days, over 100,000 messages had gone to "a whole mix of different people." As these messages continued spreading, they gathered a robust resistance movement by the time the campaign became public. The melange of people this web pooled together underlines the non-discriminatory quality that underlies text messaging. As Byaruhanga has explained,

The communication that goes to individuals will penetrate as many different kinds of people as possible across professions, tribes, generations and mostly political affiliations. Eventually you discover you've achieved diversity in reach that you otherwise wouldn't have. So you have the right audience, have made it very fast, optimized the cost and achieved impact (Byaruhanga, 2009).

As a result of the pressure this campaign generated, and the widespread, and at some points violent, protests, which drew both the elite and the general public, the government backed down and suspended its proposal but did not totally abandon it. Speaking at a rally, Museveni still insisted Uganda, and Africa's, future lay in processing and as so factories need to be supported in any way possible (Namutebi, 2007).

Beyond Mabira: The Number to Call Is...

The key observation to be drawn from the Save Mabira Campaign is how it demonstrated the power and influence of mobile phones in mobilizing and engaging citizens around important issues. Yet, because of its singularity, (there has not been another or equally successful campaign, although most people speculate a greater use and reliance on mobile phones and text messaging in the 2011 general elections), one has to look at a more pervasive practice in the discussion of the impact of mobile phones to this chapter's central issues. This is to be found in the highly interactive nature of most, if not all, programming on Ugandan radio.

One of the central characteristics of radio presenters all across the country is to remind their audiences on a daily basis, and all throughout the program, the numbers they can call or send their text messages to in case they want to take part in the program, to which listeners duly comply. Who then is it that typically calls into these radio programs? This is difficult to satisfactorily answer in a quantitative manner in the absence of extensive data that fairly represents a cross-country sample.

That said, according to the guided survey earlier mentioned as well as close observation of radio programs, a typical caller in Kampala, as tables 5.1–5.4 below indicate, is a male youth, fairly educated and in some form of employment. Note: while it is true Kampala has the highest percentage of educated people, the survey results indicating that most respondents hold university education are skewed. Whereas there is no doubt they might be well educated, it is very unlikely all the respondents who mentioned having university degrees actually have them. Sometimes, and for unclear reasons, people will tend to inflate or falsify aspects of themselves whenever they are

asked to fill out surveys. For instance, in one noted incident, one male respondent checked the female box as his gender. Fortunately, because I administered the survey myself and monitored it closely, I was able to insist that it is corrected. I was also able to provide clarifications where respondents did not quite understand the questions, which further reduced the instances of them providing incorrect or falsified information.

Caller Profile

Table 5.1 Gender of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	40	90.9	90.9
	Female	4	9.1	
	Total	44	100.0	100.0

Table 5.2 Age of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18 - 25	7	15.9	15.9
	26 - 34	25	56.8	72.7
	35 - 42	8	18.2	90.9
	43 - 50	2	4.5	95.5
	Above 50	2	4.5	
	Total	44	100.0	100.0

Table 5.3 Education of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Primary level	5	11.4	11.4
	O' level secondary	3	6.8	18.2
	A' level secondary	1	2.3	20.5
	Tertiary institution	11	25.0	45.5
	University	24	54.5	
	Total	44	100.0	100.0

Table 5.4 Source of Income

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Employed	23	52.3	52.3
	Self Employed	16	36.4	88.6
	Unemployed	3	6.8	95.5
	Others	2	4.5	
	Total	44	100.0	100.0

This typical caller, as tables 5.5–5.7 indicate, owns at least two mobile phones, which he regularly uses, in this case, to call or send text messages to different programs, mostly once or several times a day, or occasionally throughout the week. He is motivated by more than one factor to call in or contribute to a radio program. From the guided survey, among the main factors include influencing debate, that is expressing oneself and getting personal views out, as well as countering distortions and misinformation. This is common among people who express a high interest in political programming especially.

Other factors include creating awareness among other less informed people, demanding and/or requesting better services from government, connecting with friends, entertainment, enhancing debating skills, and personal advertisement. It is not uncommon to hear people introduce themselves by their occupations and where they are located without being prompted at all before going on to state their reason for calling. As one such person, Hajat Amina, who owns a restaurant in Kampala’s downtown area, said, “I call to send greetings to my family and friends and also to let people know what I do. My restaurant has become more known around here.” People nurturing political ambitions

have also been known to regularly call and participate in roundtable open air political debates as a way of testing their views and popularizing themselves.

Mobile Phone Profile

Table 5.5 Mobile Phone Ownership

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	43	97.7	97.7
	No	1	2.3	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	

Table 5.6 Number of Mobile Phones Owned

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	11	25.0	25.0
	2	15	34.1	59.1
	3	9	20.5	79.5
	4	7	15.9	95.5
	5	1	2.3	97.7
	5 >	1	2.3	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	

Table 5.7 Motivation for Texting/Calling

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Personal/Social expression	13	29.5	29.5
Contributing to discussion	11	25.0	54.5
Countering distortions and misinformation	7	16.0	70.5
Raising awareness/ Enlightening public	6	13.6	84.1
Requesting/ Demanding services	5	11.4	95.5
Miscellaneous	2	4.50	
Total	44	100.0	100.0

The caller profile is supported by national statistical data that show the largest percentage of the country's population to be comprised of children (under 18 years) and the youth (between 18-35 years). The proportion of the elderly people (60 years and above) is 4.6 percent and declining (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2009). That a far larger number of men than women call into radio stations is a function of income distribution. Women generally earn less than men and they are, therefore, less likely to have the disposable income to spend on phone calls. They might also be hindered by socio-cultural factors but these are not as pronounced in the city as they would be in the countryside.

Given how central a feature calls from audiences is to Ugandan radio, many observers hold the view that mobile phones have widened the platform for participation by making it possible for people to call and say anything they want. As Tabaire, a media trainer and consultant has noted, for many people who call into radio stations it has become part of their lives to do so. These people have consciously developed expectations around these devices and increasingly perceive the ability to use their phones to say whatever is it they want to say as an entitlement (2009).

According to Lugalambi, the scope of debate has also been made even greater and more important by the use and encouragement of local languages, which allows in many more people than would have participated if there were language restrictions. Out of over 200 licensed radio stations, there is none, for instance, that exclusively broadcasts in English. Only a few, less than ten, can be said to lean heavily towards English.

Political Expression vs. Non-political Expression

There is no doubt mobile phones have enhanced participation and broadened horizons of expression. Everybody points to the volumes of calls that radio stations receive as the evidence to support such a claim. What is in doubt pertains to who exactly is participating and the substance of their contributions and what the overall impact might be. There are rumours and claims that political parties as well as individuals with specific agendas, such as denigrating an opponent, hire people whom they fund to call and achieve such purposes. Yet all the people that were surveyed strongly denied they were on anyone's payroll with specific tasks to accomplish. They all insisted they spent their own money for one or more reasons stated above. Lugalambi has noted that even if the claims that some callers are hired were true, they do not do their employers' bidding to such an "extent where they can crowd out the huge number of people who are motivated by their own interests in participating in debates" (Lugalambi, 2009).

Mwesige's well-regarded study on the political talk show phenomenon in Uganda, while acknowledging the new possibilities this mediated space has opened up, "even for the advantaged individuals who previously had access to other mediated sources of political information", indicates how people who make contributions regularly remain a fairly small group compared to other listeners, with program hosts estimating "that well over 60% of the calls they received were from the same people" (Mwesige, 2004, p. 142-143). This would clearly suggest new technologies have not enhanced participation by bringing into conversations sections of society that were previously left out. Only that mediated political shows, as has already been noted, make a tiny fraction of the total programming hours on radio and by extension the volume of calls received.

Such studies also proceed from the assumption that political expression is superior to other types of expression and that a larger percentage of the population is interested and as such attracted by it. On the contrary, there are a lot more people who call to convey greetings or contribute to other discussions providing such a rich variety because of their different backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities and worldviews. In other words, people are engaging with new technologies something nearing communication by word of mouth, which about half of the households in Uganda mentioned as their main source of information according the last national census (Khamalwa, 2006).

Timothy Kalyegira, researcher and editor of the news site *Uganda Record*, has noted in regard to non-political expression that, “You get to hear people express themselves whether it is expressing disgust at government or sending greetings to their families or requesting songs. It is all expression. This [is] social expression that some people might argue has no real net value to society” (Kalyegira, 2009). This type of expression has other important aspects to it. As Kalyegira added, most radio stations that broadcast exclusively in Luganda, the most widely spoken of all local languages, “have programs where people call in to express their anger but also to report what is happening where they are calling from. In that way news is put out and it has all been made possible essentially by the mobile phones for average people who are not yet at the sophisticated level of the Internet” (2009).

Yet even for those who are politically motivated to call and participate in radio programs, it is important to ask whether they believe their contributions influence political affairs, and whether the political system is responsive to such contributions. According to my survey (Table 5.7), those who call to influence debate, to inform or

enlighten the public and correct distortions and misinformation expressed strong belief in their own political self-efficacy. Although those who control the political system keenly listen in to these debates, many of the people surveyed and interviewed do not believe the state cares that much about the substance of these debates unless it suits them or when they perceive real threats to their power. In a view he shares with most, Tabaire has noted that,

The government here generally, much as they aren't as happy to have as many people speak out, if it doesn't threaten their power they aren't going to do anything about it. It's only as long as that talk is translated into something actionable, something truly a threat to the hold on power by those who are running the country then you will see a serious response (2009).

There are numerous examples that bear out this observation. As one scholar has noted, "In 2002, the government, weary of the criticism it was fielding from Ebimeeza [open air roundtable discussions, mostly about politics, broadcast live on radio], attempted to ban them" citing flimsy reasons such as specifications contained within radio stations licences that "only allowed them to broadcast from "indoor", rather than from "outdoor" studios" (Khamalwa, 2006). There was a lot of opposition to this plan and while the government backed down it did not relent on its pressure and threats.

More recently, in 2007, the government drafted a law, widely referred to as the phone tapping bill (see Chapter Three), to enable it monitor "certain communication" claiming it was intended to "fight terrorism and crime". Yet the bill was widely interpreted as a state ploy to control people from freely expressing themselves. Indeed, because of the fears and uncertainties that that bill stirred up, six of the targeted survey respondents declined participation expressing mistrust about this research's intentions

and whether it was not an undercover work of the state, regardless of countless assurances to the contrary.

Following the September 2009 protests (see Chapter Three), news outlets increasingly feel the need to be extremely cautious and to negotiate a difficult terrain, largely by guess work, where it is unclear what is likely to stir the government's ire in order to avoid being closed down. "The radio stations, in particular, are starting to dread the prospect of handling live studio phone calls" (Uganda Record, 2010). This has a huge impact on people's freedom to express themselves and by extension curtails the potential of mobile phones as enablers of such expression.

New Media as Crisis Media

The government's attitude towards its people's desire to freely express their views is telling as it highlights the glaring democratic disjunction in Uganda. The government's actions belie its unceasing proclamations as being truly democratic and deeply invested in people's rights and freedoms. This raises the question whether, given their advantages, new technologies can emerge as alternative communication spaces where there are restrictions to the media, to free speech and expression. Whereas there is not a sufficient body of experiences to draw satisfactory answers to this question, 80 percent of survey respondents believe mobile phones can outmanoeuvre state restrictions.

In addition to this, there are growing indications that the power and influence of new technologies is revealed more and amplified in moments of crises. In other words, they are the media of choice during a crisis. The anti-Mabira campaign is one of several examples in Uganda that clearly illustrated this. Also, during the September protests,

when the government shut down a number of radio stations for encouraging people to call in and report what was happening in places they were calling in from, people resorted to text messaging and social networking sites, which became the main conduit of information about that crisis. Similar observations hold for experiences in other African countries already noted like Kenya and Zimbabwe; new technologies rose to prominence on account of the prevailing political crises at the time.

But there are downsides, too. Chief among them is how easily susceptible new technologies are to abuse. Wherever there are restrictions, they seem to inspire a belief that someone is hiding something and so rumours, assumptions, and conspiracies are exchanged and spread as fast as if they were the truth. New technologies are the new version of the 1960s radio Katwe forum in which people let out anything that had been blocked from the mainstream media.

As B.B. Illakut, head of the mass communication department at Uganda Christian University, noted,

There is not much you can do now when most people have [access to] mobile phones and they are always in constant touch with each other sharing news and information whether it is personal or public. If you stifle press freedom, people will turn to their mobile phones and other online platforms and say even much more than is true because of the assumption that you must be hiding something if you're blocking it out of the public view... People who feel restricted will turn to the Internet and mobile phones to disseminate even much more damaging information that when it comes to voting would have a huge impact (2009).

The most extreme of such a situation, as the Kenyan crisis demonstrated, is new technologies can be used to fire up animosity and ethnic hatred among disparate communities. According to Pius Katunzi, business development editor and columnist for

Observer, good as they are, new technologies “can be a force of evil.” As he explains it, because “Mobile phones and SIM cards have become cheaper...someone can decide to buy ten SIM cards and four mobile phones for the purpose of doing clandestine work.” For that reason, there is expected to be “an avalanche of misinformation” in the general elections of 2011 (Katunzi, 2010).

However, there are no reported cases yet in Uganda where text messaging has been used to stoke ethnic animosity and hatred. Rather, there have been text messages calling for a change in the top leadership of the ruling National Resistance Movement party. Those whom these messages have targeted in turn framed them as a broader scheme to bring down the president (Nganda, 2009). Museveni and his government in general is known for labelling as “*inciting the public*” any type of criticism or challenge brought against it.

Another main downside is accessibility. Even if one were to discount the fact that single individuals have double or multiple mobile subscriptions, still the total number of mobile phone users would be just under 30 percent of the total population. The biggest percentage of these comprises mostly the middle class elite or other urban dwellers. This is partly because mobile phones are highly saturated in urban areas and also because urbanites have more disposable incomes to spend on such things as mobile phones. The majority of people are left out of the information loop and out of active participation whether in social issues or the political process.

Further to this, even if it were that the majority had more access, it would require high levels of sophisticated organization, communication and marketing for new technologies in general and mobile phones in particular to crystallize as dependable

information and communication spaces. Such are not skills in abundant supply in Uganda and even if they were, their success would depend on several other factors, including politics, economics and levels of social development. That news businesses in highly developed countries have yet to find profitable models over providing news online is a fair indication of the extent to which new technologies are difficult to profit from.

The next, and concluding, chapter looks at the future of news media in Uganda. It attempts to gauge, based on the ongoing impact new technologies have on news, the major forms of transformations most likely to happen in Uganda's context. The chapter also revisits the correlation between new technologies and enhancing participation, and by extension democracy. It focuses on what the role of the mobile phone and the Internet is likely to be in the 2011 elections. If the 1996 and the 2001 elections largely belonged to radio, there is every indication that the 2011 elections will be fought out on new technologies, most especially mobile phones.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF NEWS AND NEWS MEDIA IN UGANDA

News in Uganda and the organizations that consider it as their core product, like elsewhere in the world, find themselves at an interesting junction today on account of new technologies, particularly the Internet and the more basic mobile phones. The so-called smart phones might still be a long way away from having a significant impact worth studying. This is not to say that news and news outlets have not come to a similar junction before. The history of technological advancement is littered with numerous occasions where journalism rose to another level on the back of newly invented technologies of the day.

Yet the excitement and aspirations that greeted past technological innovations, although not completely absent, are not shared by a majority of people today. In fact, there is as much expectation as there is apprehension for the new technologies of the 21st century. One only needs to do a quick search online to find a trove of these divergent views. John Pavlik, for instance, has noted new technologies are transforming journalism at unprecedented proportions only comparable to the 19th century penny press (Pavlik, 2001, p. xi). Other observers have added how these technologies have redefined the balance of power between news producers/providers and news consumers, shattering the hegemony of the former, erasing the concept of audience associated with the latter, and setting up the stage for a whole new dispensation (Gillmor, 2006; Rosen, 2006; Jarvis, 2005).

A counter argument posits the impact of new information technologies is often exaggerated in no least way by overestimating how much of it is actually new. New media have yet to obtain the power to set an agenda, a significant role associated with news media, for the simple fact that their audiences remain relatively small. They are generally still in their infant stages of evolution, which makes it difficult to say anything determinate about them. Moreover, the most visited news sites are those that belong to major mainstream brands (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).

The Problem with Comparisons

There is need to exercise extreme caution when trying to draw comparisons of news media among different countries and the impact new technologies have had on them. Whereas news media the world over might be at the same junction, they arrived there in different ways, having gone through and been influenced by different experiences. News media largely mirror the socio-political development of their localities. As such, whatever has shaped the current texture of news media in any given place directly has weight over the choices those in control make as they proceed forth in the whole new territory that new information technologies are creating.

Consider the U.S., for example, where the news media are touted among the central planks to its democratic process and where the Internet has shaken journalism to its very foundations (Miel & Faris, 2008; Nichols & McChesney, 2009). One of the two major dilemmas the country faces is whether news media will sustain their role in democracy in the age of new media. The other is to find a profitable business model for

news online to stem the tide of dwindling newspaper readership and by extension revenue. On the other hand, countries like Uganda are still preoccupied with myriad challenges including securing more freedom for the press, curtailed by the state and by advertisers, who threaten to withdraw their advertisement if negative stories about their businesses are published, negotiating a more sustainable role in supporting democratic culture and social and cultural advancements, improving training, professional levels, and staving off external control (Karikari, 2007).

With specific regard to technologies, the differences among countries could not be starker, whether the comparison is made between developed and underdeveloped countries or just among underdeveloped countries. Technologies, as already noted, are by-products of social processes. Any technology “becomes available as an element or a medium in a process of change that is in any case occurring or about to occur” (Williams, 2000, p. 38). Therefore, how each country or community adopts these technologies is dependent on these on-going social processes. Moreover, the media that emerge out of these technologies “are not fixed natural objects; they have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication” (Marvin, 1988, p. 8).

As such, the experience of the first adopters of any given technology is certainly incomparable with that of communities where the same technology is later dumped, usually after a newer technology has been invented. The Linotype machines, for instance, that enabled the critical press of the 1960s in Uganda (see Chapter Four) were part of old technologies Germany wanted to dispense with. Dumping, unfortunately, remains by far the most common way technologies have been transferred to Africa. Therefore, many

times, communities in Africa or Uganda in particular, in which old technologies are dumped, have little, if any, option but to adapt habits and practices that come firmly entrenched with them in a futile attempt to catch up with the sources of these technologies. In some cases this adoption might be slow in large part because of the incompatibility of the technologies with socio-cultural realities in the communities trying to adopt them. As Aaron Mushengyezi has argued, and rightly so, that,

“[C]ommunication models from the developed world...often do not impact on the rural masses for which they are meant because they are not 'contextualized' to the local settings, cultural dialectics and worldview of the people. The bulk of the rural people are non-literate, poor and have little or no access to modern mass media such as television, radio, film, newspapers, the internet and email” (2003, p. 107).

This observation, with regard to new information technologies, is true particularly of the Internet. Whereas there is a lot of interest in increasing Internet access and bridging the gap between developed and underdeveloped countries, its use has remained largely an urban phenomenon and the way its use is evolving is no way different from what already obtains in most developed countries. Unless there are concerted efforts to find different ways of using the Internet, one can postulate it might be used in very similar ways as those where it has almost achieved ubiquity.

There are, of course, exceptions, as the same observation cannot be applied to the mobile phone. The speed at which it has integrated with normal patterns of life is unprecedented. New uses such as money transfers and mini information bureaus have been assigned to them beyond their basic use of making/receiving calls and text messages. Mobile phones remain a ripe area for research as people increasingly integrate them in virtually all spheres of their lifestyles. They are poised to become very central in

mobilizing communities for socio-cultural and/or socio-political issues in large part because of how well they lend themselves to and amplify, at a very individualistic level, than even radio broadcasting can compare, oral traditions of communication, which remains firmly entrenched in these communities.

More interestingly, a general consensus is beginning to form that mobile phones are also well positioned to extend the Internet to many more people across the continent than computers have been able to. In fact, many more people in what is seen as the developing world are set to have their first ever introduction to the Internet by way of mobile phones as connectivity improves along with other supporting technologies such as those with a higher spectral efficiency (that is, the rate at which information is transferred); when use of Internet grows, and prices fall. The challenge, of course, lies in, among others, developing efficient ways of presenting information in a small format that suits the miniature phone screens, stabilizing data rates over mobile networks (Cerf, 2007; Berners-Lee, 2007; Southwood, 2009).

It is also noteworthy that Uganda, unlike its East African Community (EAC) members, has had a more turbulent socio-political history, which has rubbed off onto its media. For instance, whereas Kenya, Uganda's neighbour to the east, "has had a vibrant media industry for over a century" and Tanzania, Uganda's neighbour to the south-east, boasts the highest number of registered publications, "as many as 350 newspapers, magazines, periodicals" (Mwesige & Kalinaki, 2007, p. 104, 108), and is not known for being hostile to news media, the story in Uganda is totally the opposite. It is one (see Chapter Three) in which journalists and news outlets have endured more darker days with very short-lived periods of relief all throughout their history. It is also an account where

every successive state has repeatedly started out as a strong media ally only for it to turn hostile and very unfriendly a short while later.

These context-specific experiences are very much at play as new information technologies take root and establish themselves as main sources of channelling and accessing information. For instance, in Uganda, news media, particularly those which perceive themselves as independent and are in turn perceived by the state as critical, view new media more primarily as a source of refuge than another platform for channelling information as, say, publications that enjoy better relations with the government would.

In comparison with Kenya, for example, which has more Internet users, a vibrant economy and media, news consumers, as one of the well-regarded commentators in the region has noted, are turning online out of frustration with what the mainstream media prioritizes as important (Onyango-Obbo, 2010). This would suggest Kenyan media organizations view new technologies more as a way to sustain a fleeing readership by following people online. As someone identifying under a pseudonym in one among many comments on the online edition of Daily Nation, one of Kenya's largest circulating newspapers, noted quite eloquently,

Those of us who read the [N]ation and other papers online are least interested in those tired Kenyan political intrigues that old men (who don't touch the Internet) are so keen on. Some writers don't seem to realize that we also read international newspapers online- and judge their articles quality by those standards. During the post election violence, the [BBC] and [CNN] websites were constantly updated from the ground keeping us informed especially after the security minister banned live coverage.

New Media Takeover

To be sure, the proliferation of the mobile phone and the rapid uptake of the Internet in Uganda have yet to attract serious academic and/or research attention about what future implications they might have on news media. Much of what exists is restricted to some form of industry research, which is exclusively focused on growing profit, and a trickle of news commentaries, which at best are a clear exaggeration of new technologies.

For example, in one commentary about the impact of mobile phones in the 2011 elections and whether in the era of mobile phones it is still relevant for the government to shut down news outlets they deem critical, one observer has noted how, “In the 2011 [general elections], radios, newspapers and other traditional media will play second fiddle to the new media. What could have been said on the radios, will now be summarized on people’s phone screens” (Katunzi, 2010).

Another commentator with similar thoughts, while postulating how the media in Africa might look like in 2020, noted that, “With the proliferation that we shall see soon of digital TV channels, and high speed ubiquitous Internet, even FM stations will also become irrelevant” (Onyango-Obbo, 2010).

Will the Internet and mobile phones, as the predominant new media platforms, render the more established media in Uganda irrelevant, and therefore eventually replace them, as these and other observers think? The short answer is, whereas it is fair to speculate new information technologies might underwrite a much better landscape in the coming years than what exists now, there is no way to be sure how these technologies will impact existing media platforms in the absence of research data tracking ways in which people use these technologies. In the developed world, such as the U.S., where this

data is available, there is no indication that new media are rendering the old irrelevant. They are not even anywhere close to threatening to replace them. On the contrary, the latest studies show that “the future of new and old media [is] more tied together than some may think” (Pew Research Center, 2010).

For Uganda, then, a closer place in which to search for clues regarding what impact new technologies might have is to look more critically at the current subscription numbers and levels of penetration of new information technologies. There are currently close to three million Internet users out of a total population of about 32 million people. Available studies, published seven to ten years ago, about what these people actually use the Internet for, indicate up to 98 percent used it for social interaction, mostly email. To email can be added social networking sites whose use has exploded in recent times. In distant second were those who surfed for other forms of information, mostly scholarship and business (Mwesige, 2004; Minges, Brown, & Kelly, 2001). Even though the extension of fibre optic cables promise better and cheaper connectivity, which hitherto ranked highest in restricting Internet growth, the dearth of research tracking such patterns of use makes it difficult to tell with a dependable level of accuracy what the future will look like.

This is no different for mobile phones, regardless of how well they have been taken up in comparison to the Internet. If we take the research’s survey findings, which indicate that the majority of mobile phone users subscribe to at least two different networks (that is, owns two SIM cards), that cuts the actual number of people who are currently connected to mobile phones by one half to about 4.75 million, or 15 percent,

against the current total population of 31 million. If projected growth by 2012 is factored in, only then does the current estimated number of mobile phone users actually add up.

These numbers are, undoubtedly, impressive, especially the latter. But yet again the inability to map out with some level of accuracy who is connected to mobile phones, in terms of age, gender, interests, source and level of income and education levels makes it difficult to draw any sufficient conclusions about these communication devices. Moreover, to draw on this thesis's research findings again, results in all these variables are skewed towards men. That is, from the survey conducted more men are connected to mobile phones and generally are more educated and earn more income in comparison to women who, besides young children and the youth, comprise the majority of the country's population. This means the voices of the largest percentage of the population remain locked out of this new revolution.

These challenges of mobile phones in Uganda are further compounded by the literacy factor. According to some studies, "As mobile phones approach ubiquity, the proportion of users who are functionally illiterate will grow both in relative and absolute terms" (West, 2008, p. 29). While this is not a problem when relaying basic information like the weather, commodity prices, sports updates, it becomes one when the information is more complex like campaign messages. This is because of the simple fact that mobile phone "interfaces are [still] highly textual at the moment. To fully utilize the functionality of the device you have to be literate" (West, 2008, p. 24). There are, of course, ways to easily leap the literacy barrier. Multimedia messaging services (MMS), an enhanced form of short message services (SMS), is one of them. It enables sending information in different formats including voice. This would go a long way in Uganda where, for

example, there is virtually no use of voicemail service. The only problem is this, in a way, would require a level of sophistication on the part of the user over a device whose rapid uptake has largely been because of how easy it is to use.

The dearth of mobile phone user information in a country such as Uganda, where a lot of languages are spoken, and lack of meticulous planning make precise targeting of information, a unique advantage with text messaging, all but impossible. Guess work or sheer lack of concern takes over and as a result users get bombarded with all sorts of messages they may or may not be interested in, let alone understand, which is both irritating and an affront to their privacy. This is already happening and there is no legislation barring telecom companies or other private SMS service providers, a fast-growing sub-sector, from randomly sending messages to people's phones. This has a negative effect of forcing people to tune out even to messages they might have found interesting or useful.

Almost all people interviewed for this thesis, while not being as in-depth in their articulation pointed out some of the issues above and other challenges discussed in preceding chapters to suggest it might be a long time before new technologies become significant alternative platforms in Uganda. It might even be longer before they impact the more mainstream or legacy media in the same way they have done in the West, although they do not have to follow the pattern in the West. The failure of Radiokatwe.com, for example, to sustain its popularity, and the failure of other websites that came after it to catch on, attest to the difficulties that stand in the way of the Internet as a new platform for exchanging information. While the website's problems can be pinned down to the nature of its content, they still reflect badly on the technology. As for

blogs, although there is a vibrant blogging community in Uganda, most of the blogs contain their owners' escapades or issues that strike their fancy. They largely remain known only amongst bloggers. None is yet to stand out as uniquely focused on more general public affairs, and with a varied readership.

Some of these difficulties are the low levels of Internet penetration, the absent level of sophistication required to make more use of mobile phones, the low level of civic awareness necessary to quickly tell inaccurate or sensational information, which has potential to spread very fast on both the Internet and mobile phones. Others include energy inadequacies across the country, and, above all, cost. Call charges, to say nothing of Internet costs, remain expensive.

The average charge per minute, which is the most commonly preferred billing standard among phone users, is Ush400, relative to an average income of Ush70,000, about US\$33, that about 70 per cent of the population earns per month (Kossov, 2009). This is the main reason why people subscribe to two different networks since the quality of service of all telecom operators is reliable across the country. Expensive call charges have also forced many phone users to limit their calls to highly important matters and encouraged flash calling or beeping as it is widely referred to in Uganda, which a number of people find irksome. That is, someone calls another but does not complete the call as an indication for the latter to call back.

In any case, there is the element of adaptation, which is already happening. As Andrew M. Mwenda, managing editor of Independent noted, "New media are platforms for old media institutions. New technologies have not brought new companies" (2009). As Bernard Tabaire, a media trainer and consultant, revealed, at Nation Media Group,

Daily Monitor's parent company and the largest media conglomerate in the region, “There is a huge shift towards this [new media], with someone specifically to develop editorial content for the digital platform. So they are thinking long and hard about the idea of how do you prepare yourself to take advantage of these technologies; what do they mean and how do we harness them to put out a news product that is sensible” (2009). Nation Media Group also owns Kenya’s *Daily Nation* mentioned earlier.

According to Wairagala Wakabi, an ICT researcher and journalist, adaptation might require news organizations to “go beyond just providing news and provide platforms for debate, feedback, possibilities for getting more useful information to people’s lives beyond what happened the previous day” (2009). As already noted (see Chapter Four), *Daily Monitor* is already in the process of refashioning itself into an information company. Whereas there was no clarification how exactly that might look like, it will be interesting to see when it finally happens and whether other organizations might be tickled to copy. The overall point here is that, in this transition period, news media might find it very rewarding to be actively engaged in helping to shape the use of technologies shaping their future than simply waiting to report on them.

New Information Technologies and Democracy

New or digital media have, undoubtedly, stirred a lot of excitement in every sphere of life. As users, we have projected on them hopes and expectations, such as the ability to provide more meaningful participation in national civic life and improving democratic processes themselves. As such, it is very easy to confuse their capacity or potential with what percentage of that, given the interplay of other key variables discussed earlier,

actually obtains in reality, at least insofar as it appears now in Uganda's context. Most scholarship and discourse about the role of new technologies in promoting democracy in Africa are focused on their potential and less, if at all, on tracking or monitoring how actually, and currently, this is happening.

Firoze Manji, the editor-in-chief of Pambazuka News, a widely-read pan-African website, while re-echoing technology's social determinism theory, has cautioned against making a fetish of new technologies, "that is to say to embody a thing with some sort of power. The reason why revolutions happen has got nothing to do with people using mobile phones, etcetera. It's when mobile phones are available they'll use them, if it's paper that's available they'll use it, if its faxes that's what they do" (Manji, 2009).⁷ Well, people in Uganda have mobile phones now and there is unanimity, as the previous chapter noted, that the 2011 general elections belong to new information technologies, more particularly mobile phones.

These elections in a sense then provide an important test for new technologies in regard to claims about their ability to enhance democratic processes. For one, they are unlike the Kenya or Zimbabwe political crises in which there was not much room for preparation as the mainstream media were suddenly shut down forcing people to quickly scramble around for alternative ways to get out information. Even without looking far back into the past, the government's crackdown on the media following the September 2009 protests (see Chapter Three) and its proposed amendments to the Press and Journalist Act 2001 (Article 29 Coalition, 2010) do not portend well for the future. The impact of new information technologies essentially lies in effective preparation and

⁷ The comment was made on Nov. 23, 2009 at the Democracy Dialogue organized by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT) and held at Old City Hall.

organization. Thus, it falls to media outlets or any other interested party, such as civil society organizations, to heed the warning call that these recent events represent and organize accordingly.

The 2011 elections will unfold in a totally different landscape with regard to new information technologies compared to all past elections under Museveni's long-running presidency. For example, during the 1996 and 2001 elections, both FM radio and mobile phones were still new and there were only a handful of radio stations and only two telecom operators. Also, there were barely any private SMS providers, as is the case now. All of these factors limited the level of familiarity among users. By the 2006 elections there had been significant improvements, evidence of which the news media experimented with reporting election results in real time using mobile phones.

In a particularly marked example, the *Daily Monitor* set up at its head office a parallel tally centre to that of the national electoral commission, which interestingly is located only a stone's throw away. Together with its sister radio station Kfm, it began publishing on its website a running vote tally based on actual results from polling stations that were phoned in by their reporters as well as other election observers. The government moved swiftly and jammed both the website and the radio's frequency as their independently tallied results increasingly contradicted what the national electoral commission was putting out, falsely claiming that what the newspaper was doing was illegal (Ifex, 2006). The government's action was a salutary lesson to all other media outlets that were carrying live broadcasts of election results.

The *Daily Monitor* results generally showed a much closer race than what the electoral commission was reporting. In some particular cases, for instance, results from

the western region, the incumbent's stronghold, showed him increasingly trailing his fiercest rival, Kizza Besigye, even as the electoral commission called most of the districts in this region for Museveni. Later, this information would prove vital in sworn affidavits by Besigye challenging the election results. The Supreme Court unanimously agreed there had been non-compliance with all election-related laws yet could not annul the results because "by a majority decision of four to three we find that it was not proved to the satisfaction of the court that the failure to comply with the provisions of the law affected the results in a substantial manner" (Mayanja, 2006; BBC, 2006).

Between these elections to date, the number of telecom operators has grown to six, with over 10 others licensed and the quality and reliability of their services has improved. Alongside the telecoms, there has emerged a vibrant sub-sector of SMS providers, there has been an increase in a number of professionals, both in technology and political strategy, and the population is far much more familiar with mobile phones than it has ever been in all 17 years of their existence in Uganda. There has also been a growing disaffection and anxiety towards Museveni whom many people perceive to be clinging onto power and running the country aground rather propelling it forward. Consequently, a confluence of these factors will bear strongly on the nature of the political sphere in 2011 all of which will make for interesting observation and study.

While mobile phones cannot be said to have reached maturation, they are at a level at which it will be remarkable to watch how they are deployed, by who and for what purposes, and what impact will be attributed to them at the end of the elections. This will be crucial tangible evidence to add to the experiences of other African countries to date in the general discussion going forward about the influence of new technologies on political

processes. Some of the ready and waiting roles, according to people interviewed for this thesis, include monitoring and documenting, through taking pictures and sending messages to designated locations, if these have been set up and publicized well in advance, incidences of violence and intimidation that are usually common during campaigns and activities at polling stations where a lot of vote rigging is reputed to take place.

Those with intentions to fiddle with results might find it difficult to do so because, as Daniel Kalinaki, managing editor of *Daily Monitor* noted, “If you have people at polling stations with mobile phones and they are all texting figures that have been announced [either back to their party headquarters, to a designated location, or to their friends] then it is going to be very hard for people to rig” (2009). Timothy Kalyegira, editor of the online-only *Uganda Record*, has added, “The idea that polling officials were the only ones who could relay information is gone. Now political parties, ordinary voters or sympathizers can report any malpractice they witness. The profusion of phones makes that difference” (2009).

Some observers see the potential to transmit information using mobile phones, even if they are limited in reach as they indeed are in relation to the total population, as a dependable strategy against instances where the state can easily shut down a news outlet because of its physical location. The limitation is mostly rationalized as being better than having no alternative at all. As Edward Ojulu, acting managing editor of *Observer*, noted, “You can’t stop people using text messages to send messages informing [others whom they know or whose numbers they have access to] that this and that has happened” (2009). The prospects of mobile phones have forced all political groups to target them

among their mobilization strategies to get their messages out. They are already conducting dry runs in preparation for 2011 to fully take advantage of them.

However, it is not entirely true that communication through mobile phones is beyond government control. As a counter-strategy, it is possible, albeit a little difficult and perhaps politically and economically risky too, for the government to order all telecom companies and all SMS providers to shut down their services. It has happened in Kenya. During its political crisis already alluded to, the government tried to pressure Safaricom, the major telecom company, through which most messages were being channelled, to shut down its short messaging service. The company's top executives prevailed upon the government, arguing for them to use the same service to send out positive counter messages. The government backed down and actually followed Safaricom's advice (Rotich & Goldstein, 2008). As this experience clearly demonstrates, the government has at its disposal the power to shut down telecoms or the choice to make use of new technologies to counter grassroots communication from its opposition.

It is hard to tell whether a similar scenario will occur in Uganda but there are indications the government might employ multiple counter-strategies. At the time of writing, the ruling national resistance movement (NRM) party had opened up a full-fledged communication bureau for the express purpose of harnessing the power of these new technologies and rebutting attack messages from the opposition (Katende, 2010; Olupot, 2010; Katunzi, 2010). Moreover, not long ago (see Chapter Three), the government made moves to monitor communications by drafting the widely criticized Regulation of Interception of Communications (RIC) Bill, more referred to as the phone

tapping bill. If past experiences are any good indicators, the government will force this bill through parliament, where it enjoys majority seats, if it deems it necessary.

Whereas it would not be a good idea for the government to move to control service providers, it is important to note that mobile phones are easily susceptible to abuse where everyone is virtually a returning officer, as in when someone sends out false information or results for the sole purpose of creating misunderstanding. In instances like these, it falls mainly to the mainstream news outlets, given their financial wherewithal and credibility, but more importantly, if they envision and prepare for such situations, to meet that challenge by sorting truth from falsehoods and, in the *Daily Monitor* model, as information companies, send this out in text format. The potential to boost one's credibility, ratings and the financial rewards that come along is an immense incentive for them to do so.

In relation to new media as crisis media discussed in the previous chapter, most people interviewed share the view that the impact of mobile phones and the Internet will likely depend on the overall tone and nature of the campaigns. As one noted, "If the election turns violent, mobile phones will be highly useful. If there are restrictions on radio, television and newspapers reporting openly and truthfully what is taking place then people will be forced to do more with mobile phones to record what is happening" (Wakabi, 2009).

Yet this need not necessarily be the case. It is here that the agency of the elite, comprising mainly the middle class and civil society, earlier mentioned in the introductory chapter, can play a vital role. Because of their skill sets and expertise, the elite occupy privileged lead agent positions from which they can prepare, organize and

ensure the impact of both the mobile phone and the Internet are not restricted to crises.

Otherwise, these technologies will mostly serve social functions. They will not impact on anything and all their other potential will go to waste.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the impact of the Internet and mobile phones, as the more prominent forms of new information technologies, on existing news media Uganda. It attempted to examine, through in-depth interviews with news executives, academics and selected individuals with deep interest in new technologies, close observation of news media, and extensive secondary research all make possible, the following central issues:

- Ways in which they are impacting on journalism in Uganda, both as a profession and as a business; and what do they mean for the future of news and news media in Uganda?
- Whether they posed any challenges to publication and dissemination of news and information;
- To what extent they expand the horizon for free expression; and,
- What potential they have to promote or support the democratic process in Uganda

Generally, the findings temper any grandiose conclusions. Both technologies are forcing news organizations to restructure and readjust in order to centrally integrate the platforms these technologies enable in their operations. All the news outlets the research focused on are at different stages of developing their online and mobile platforms to serve as significant platforms along with the print edition of their publications. The purpose of this is to properly attune themselves to new media and to also to leverage the financial benefits, in form of online advertising.

Unfortunately, whereas the mobile phone, in particular, has quickened the speed at which information can be gathered, and the Internet, the speed at which it can be

published, some of those interviewed felt reporters, and generally the news outlets they work for, have not improved on the quality of stories they report. Many of them are still events-driven, reflecting little research and scrutiny. A number of those interviewed felt that instead of using the Internet to support research, for example, a lot of reporters were misusing it, by spending more time on social interactions, such as social networking sites, email and chat. Some felt new technologies breed laziness. Reporters will have to learn to optimize how they use these new technologies, by, for instance, finding out more about the subjects they are reporting and contrasting that against what is proclaimed in the events they report, for them to have any positive impact on these issues and on the public.

Although new information technologies are always cast in positive terms, they are easily susceptible to abuse, as the case of Radiokatwe.com and unsolicited text messages in Uganda demonstrated. Such scenarios not only have the negative effect of creating disharmony and misunderstanding, they also set a bad example and easily force people to turn away from both the news and these new platforms.

In terms of enhancing participation and expanding the horizon for free expression, these technologies have, undoubtedly, as the intersection between FM radios and mobile phones demonstrated, enabled many ordinary citizens, who hitherto had no opportunity, to become involved in public debates and express their views and perspectives. This shift promises to have a significant impact on the country's democratic processes over time as usage of new technologies spreads.

A safer way to assess both the Internet and mobile phones is to look at their impact as a work in progress. While it is true they are growing and catching on rapidly, they are on balance still very much in an experimental phase. Partially, this is because

there has not been an extensive study of their evolution up to this point, while in part it is because their socio-political potential has not been seriously tested as the coming general election promises to. There have been encouraging experiences such as the anti-Mabira give-away campaign (see Chapter Five), and, to the extent that it popularized a new platform, that of Radiokatwe.com (see Chapter Four), which have revealed in quite fascinating ways what these new technologies are capable of achieving if they are well exploited.

The main challenge then, besides diligent study and research into them, is for either the media, civil society organizations or any other interested party to build on such successful experiences. After all, as Chapter Two demonstrated, there is nothing inherent in any technology to enable it to have any impact or cause any change. Their effect is realized only through the uses that are assigned to them.

The other challenge is numerical and relates to their levels of penetration. The level of Internet penetration is still abysmally low. Even mobile phones, which have permeated to the grassroots, benefit the members of the elite more since it is they who have more disposable income to use them in unlimited ways. Both of these technologies, therefore, like the mainstream media, particularly newspapers and television, remain accessible mostly to the elite. Any conclusive assessment about them needs to demonstrate cognizance of this limitation.

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