

REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 POLITICS IN UGANDA

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UGANDAN MEDIA IN THE POST COVID-19 LANDSCAPE: WHY MONEY NOT TRUTH WILL MATTER MORE

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I was recently offered the opportunity to contribute an [article](#) for the Thought Leadership Series on COVID-19 by the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) based at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, the Africa Portal, a project of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI). I argued then, and reiterate the argument hereunder, that the COVID-19 pandemic is akin to a hydra. The hydra, also called the Lernean Hydra, is, in [Greek legend](#), the offspring of Typhon and Echidna (according to the early Greek poet Hesiod's Theogony). It is a gigantic water-snake-like monster with nine heads (the number varies), one of which was immortal.

On one front, COVID-19 is a health crisis, one where medics are the most essential experts the world needs to save itself from the invisible enemy. That, however, is only one head of the hydra. Cut that head and another head emerges. The second head that crops up could take an economic shape.

The [IMF](#) tells us, “we project global growth in 2020 to fall to -3 percent. This is a downgrade of 6.3 percentage points from January 2020, a major revision over a very short period. This makes the Great Lockdown the worst recession since the Great Depression, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis.”

We shall not delve into the other heads of the hydra but what is uncontested is that we have a crisis in our hands, one that global leaders think has only been

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as severe as the second world war of the 1940s. This has implications for every facet of our lives and livelihoods considering the interconnectedness of humans today. The aviation, leisure and hospitality industry for example, has been so hard hit that its new address is the intensive care unit. The only ventilator that can return hotel occupancy above the current 0% is a reversal to normal life settings. Countries from the global south whose nongovernmental organizations sector and government, academic institutions, research projects are dependent on aid from development partners will have to engage different survival and sustainability gears as the benevolent west grapples with its own survival questions and deals with the economic recession.

This then brings us to the third head of the hydra; the media and what this economic outlook portends for the role of the media in Uganda in terms of the country's democratization journey, independence of the media and how it plays its watchdog role in light of the economic conundrum it finds itself in.

Some scholars and commentators have written of the 'slow death' of traditional media while in countries like Uganda, media practitioners and entrepreneurs familiar with the business environment here have predicted that in the next 10 years, there will be no more newspapers, at least none making a profit from the business.

University of the Witwatersrand media ethics professor, [Franz Kruger](#) has argued that, "The business model that has underpinned journalism in much of the world for at least a century is under strain and is unlikely to recover. Audiences are increasingly moving to new, largely free, media platforms to satisfy their information needs, leaving legacy media struggling to adapt."

In Uganda, newspaper copy sales and commercial viability are diminishing. [Kyamutetera](#) (2019), in a 12-year analysis of reports from the Audit Bureau of Circulations which monitors newspapers in Uganda, notes that two of Uganda's leading dailies (*The New Vision and Daily Monitor*) lost 28.2% of their circulation, dropping from a combined daily sales average of 59,279 to 42,193 copies. Weekend newspapers lost 55.6% of their circulation, dropping from a combined daily sales total of 59,897 copies in 2007 to 26,560 copies in December 2018.

This situation has only worsened as the corona virus continues to cripple business in the country so much so that some newspapers are recording half the number of already dwindling sales according to informed media industry [sources](#). Although media surveys show impressive growth in television viewership for mainly NBS TV and NTV (U) due to public thirst for information on COVID-19, this does not necessarily translate to healthy bottom lines for the business because these companies are still constructed around the old business model that heavily relies on advertising revenue which adverts depend on the overall health of the economy.

Companies that are limping to the point of contemplating retrenchment, downsizing, scaling down operations and in the worst case scenario kick starting insolvency procedures, are quite obviously unable to pay their advertising dues, likely to review advertising budgets and certain to pull the plug on current advertising contracts. Media companies like the Nation Media Group (Uganda) which publishes the *Daily Monitor* newspaper (among other titles), runs *NTV (U)*, *KFM* and *Dembe FM* radio stations, are, from what sources say, mulling cost cutting which will mean cutting editorial budgets and scaling down expensive journalism assignments. This is true with the New Vision Printing and Publishing Company too as well as smaller entities.

In the wider scheme of things, at a continental level, Botswana journalist and media entrepreneur, Alvin Ntibinyane Ntibinyane has recently noted that, “Post-COVID-19, major independent news organizations in big economies like South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria will be hard hit. Depending on how long the crisis persists and on individual cases, newspapers are going to lose between 15% to 55% in advertisement revenue in 2020. It could get worse.”

Ntibinyane observes that major independent newspapers in Nigeria have vibrant online operations and some generate more revenue online than offline with newspapers like *The Punch*, *The Guardian* and *Vanguard* seeing more traffic and increased online revenue. Like the growth in *NTV (U)* and *NBS TV* viewership numbers, there is no assured correlation between this growth in website visitors’ figures and Facebook/Twitter followership with revenue for these entities. If anything, advertising remains the bigger source of revenue and this advertising happens in bigger chunk, in the traditional media space (TV, radio, newspaper) even for those media houses with substantial online presence.

Low immunity of media houses

Therefore, the Corona Virus finds the immunity of the media at one of, if not, the lowest ends of the pool. This leaves the media exposed to the vagaries of survival dynamics or what in HIV/AIDS speak are called opportunistic illnesses. These survival dynamics may lead to either of two things: keep the media afloat or leave it as a toothless dog, a castrated bull at the mercy of whoever will pick the bill and call the tunes. A shell of its former self.

This has dire consequences for the independence of the media, its credibility and how it plays its normative roles as we understand them in classical media theory, chiefly, the watchdog role and setting the agenda for society.

Considering the weak commercial position of the country’s media houses, those who wield power, the ruling National Resistance Movement party government and corporate entities will have ever more influence over the media.



The evidence for this projection is easy to find in requests by some media houses that government of Uganda should bail them out. Whereas this is not an entirely bad idea, considering that media houses employ Uganda's sons and daughters, pay taxes to government and contribute to the wellbeing of society in their own right, this call for a bail out by some actors in the media space speaks to the vulnerability of the media in Uganda. The call for a bailout, I must reiterate, is not, in and of itself a repugnant idea considering that any business that makes a good case for one would be entitled to support from the state in accordance with the country's laws. What is troublesome though is the uncoordinated movement of troops in the sense of no industry wide consultations, intense debate and considerations of how to best advocate for such support in a manner that insulates the professional virtues, ethics and ethos of the trade from potential compromise. This, especially in a profession where credibility is as important as perception and once lost, is hard to regain and journalistic independence is at the heart of the business.

On April 7, 2020, *Daily Monitor* reported that, "Media houses under their umbrella body National Association of Broadcasters (NABs), have asked government to make a [monthly contribution of Shs15b](#) for the next three months to sustain awareness about COVID-19. In a March 21 letter to the Minister of ICT, the broadcasters said failure by government to make the contribution will see the free airtime and space being given to disseminate information about the virus suspended."

NAB also noted that in respect of arrears to the media houses, government owes its members up to Shs13b accruing from as far back as 2018. The association asked that Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) Licence and UBC carriage fees be deferred or reduced for radio and TV stations across the country. Each radio station pays an average of Shs17.5m annual licence fees and \$1,300 (Shs4.8m) monthly mast rental fees to UBC (Abett, 2020).

Government of Uganda did not respond to this call by the media houses but on April 28, 2020, Mr. Peter Ogwang, the minister of state for ICT shared on his Twitter handle that as part of the National COVID-19 response efforts, the Ministry of ICT, Information and National Guidance, "has identified licensed media houses to help government disseminate messages to sensitize the public. Financial support will be extended to 208 radio stations, 15 TVs and 32 websites. This is part of sh6 billion supplementary budget."

The ministry later published a detailed list of the beneficiary media houses and a comprehensive break down of what they were expected to broadcast or publish. A question or two arises from the minister's tweet. Was this money financial support? Was it regular advertising that government was paying for? What was the criteria in identification of the media houses?

When I put these questions to different media house owners, the resounding response was that these were adverts which government was paying for. It emerged quite clearly that government was not giving financial support but business (normal advertising) to the media houses. If anything, the decent thing was not to give adverts and pass off to the public that the government was giving financial support when the same media houses are owed substantial monies in unpaid adverts by government ministries, departments and agencies.



Peter Ogwang ✓
@OgwangOgwang

As part of the National COVID-19 response efforts, @MoICT_Ug has identified licensed media h'ses to help gov't disseminate messages to sensitize the public. Financial support will be extended to 208 radio stations, 15 TVs & 32 websites. This is part of the 6bn supplementary budget.

07:30 · 2020/04/28 · [Twitter for Android](#)

52 Retweets 149 Likes

The conversation started by NAB to have this money paid was legitimate and if government was in the mood of supporting the media, perhaps the minister would not even be talking of financial support because payment of arrears would boost the financial standing of these entities. It appears therefore, that the deliberate use of the words 'financial support' in the stead of 'adverts' was disingenuous and the NRM politicians were up to some mischief, perhaps to create the impression that the media in Uganda now owed its sustenance and life to the government which was happy to come to its rescue while also quelling earlier public anger arising from eyebrows raised by citizens in respect of what appeared an outrageous COVID-19 supplementary budget request by the ministry. Whichever way one interprets these developments, the writing on the wall is that both the government and media recognize just how commercially malnourished the Ugandan media is.

The media knows it needs every coin it can collect to publish and broadcast for another day. Government on its part knows that the survival of the media is now, more than 15 years ago when it could withhold adverts to critical newspapers and they remained in business, right at its mercy. It can now dangle the carrot. With a few billions of shillings, it can rent 100 media houses' independence through 'financial support' as Mr. Ogwang puts it, which, by the way, does not necessarily have to go through the painstaking and monstrously bureaucratic procurement processes. "Something for something". There is no unconditional love in this relationship of journalism in the marketplace. There are strings attached. It is an old story though, one as old as the media itself. As the study of critical



political economy teaches us, there is an intricately intertwined relationship in the power relations here and that has its own implications for the sociology of news production and even media production and orchestration of public debate. As political economists say, “follow the money”, it is even more fascinating to “follow this money” now when the media is literally on its knees. How this money-for-survival impacts the Ugandan media’s watchdog and agenda setting role and its overall place in the country’s democratization journey, the advancement of a free, fair and just society where rule of law, human rights observance and good governance are the building blocks of our democracy project (experiment?) is an important space to watch.

We can draw some conclusions from these observations:

- a) The media economics landscape will, for better, for worse be radically altered by the post COVID-19 economic recession and that will change a thing or two about business models of Ugandan, and indeed most African media houses.
- b) Government, the biggest advertiser, will have ever more power and control of the media, this time tacitly and tactfully wielding that power without the force of arms, intimidation or use of brute force to bring ‘errant journalists’ to order but dangling the carrot and expecting the vulnerable media houses to pick the signal.
- c) Owing to pre-existing low commercial immunity and viability of most media houses in Uganda, COVID-19’s ripple effects on the base of their existence, which is advertising revenue thanks to a weakened economy, will knock off the most vulnerable media entities and leave those surviving so desperate that the state and corporate power levers will easily push through their agenda. The media houses have few options because this is a choice between death and life.
- d) Independence and credibility of media houses will suffer considerably due to commercial constraints that will force them to sell their souls to the highest bidder and sacrifice journalistic ethos, values and ethics at the altar of survival.
- e) Social media will continue to grow as the alternative public sphere for civic engagement but efforts will be made by the state and corporate power to counterbalance its growing influence to serve their interests.

Where do we go from here? Show us the signal, mama

The net effect of these challenges in the Uganda media eco system is that media houses in their current set up will be too weak and heavily compromised to play their watchdog and agenda setting role without fear or favour. The ‘*old Monitor*’ which in the 1990s could stand its ground even in the midst of a government ban on adverts will easily coil its tail each time the political and corporate emperor frowns because the company urgently and desperately needs its advertising debts cleared by government and craves for more adverts from the same political and corporate power complex to remain afloat as the cost of doing business rises while advertising revenue falls and readership migrates online. These, therefore, are not the same old script of challenges witnessed in the last two decades. This is a different ball game to the extent that the media’s immunity has been battered by pre-existing challenges in the last 10 years that disrupted the commercial model. COVID-19 may as well deliver the knockout punch though every effort humanly possible will be made to dodge that punch, but the bruises will be conspicuous.

Some media houses, especially the radio stations and online publications will overtly become lapdogs and guard dogs for corporate and political power depending on which side of their bread is buttered, while others, especially the online publications will become attack dogs for whosoever pays the price. This new normal will favor political groupings like the NRM that can easily summon the financial muscle of the state to oil the media machine and corporate entities evading accountability for lapses in their business operations.

Journeying to the promised land of digital democracy

Ugandans are increasingly migrating to online spaces (Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube) as their new sphere for expression, legitimacy and validation of voice on issues they consider important. As the legacy media eco-system grapples with its own share of survival and sustainability questions, making it vulnerable to capture by the state and corporate power, the next frontier of engagement for these twin sources of power will be the online sphere. For now, it looks like the biblical Tower of Babel. Everyone says what they want, how they want to, to whosoever they want to and in whatever language they choose to.

There are limited boundaries in this sphere; a few public policy and morality safeguards by Facebook and Twitter, some hastily legislated and inadequately drafted cyber laws here and there. Once Uganda’s traditional media fizzles itself into irrelevance in the eyes, ears, minds and hearts of especially Uganda’s millennials, the fast and furious generation of Ugandans below 40, they will maximize their engagement on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube where they are their own editors and can afford to insult the president and his opponents

alike and debate anything and everything without the editorial mother hens their parents had to contend with when sending letters to the editor or calling in on a radio show.

This democratized and liberal nature of social media is one of its significant successes and yet its very source of vulnerability in the developing world's democratizing nations where autocrats tend to choose control over regulation.

Economic questions of unemployment, small and medium businesses in dire straits, young employees thrown out of jobs due to a harsh economic atmosphere arising from COVID-19 related recession, mean that this digital army of hungry, angry, ambitious and go getter youngsters will need to release some of these life frustrations and find someone to blame or hold accountable for their situation. They may not be lucky and will be countered in this space too by both political and corporate power. Unfiltered dissent will not be allowed to percolate in society as freely as we may want.

According to [Internet World Stats](#), out of a population of at least 45 million people, the number of internet users in Uganda as of December 2019 was 18.5 million (representing internet growth of 46% from the year 2000 when only 40,000 people had access to internet. 2.4 million people of the 18.5 million internet users are Facebook subscribers as of December 2019. Twitter users account for 10.3% of the number of Ugandans on the internet (internetworldstats, 2019).

This is a small number relative to the entire Ugandan population. What is likely to happen is that the NRM, especially the President Yoweri Museveni digital brigade on Twitter and Facebook, will invest more resources and technology in boosting their share of voice online. This may mean hiring praise singers, radical attack dogs and blindly faithful guard dogs online to ensure the president and government's back is covered. Leaders world over do this; from USA's Donald Trump to Russia's Vladimir Putin to Rwanda's Paul Kagame. Therefore, disinformation and misinformation as a propaganda strategy will become an everyday reality in our political discourse as a response to the changing dynamics discussed in this thought piece.

Being prepared for disruptive lock-outs

A 2017/2018 National Information Technology Survey report indicates that 78% of Ugandans get their information through radio while 41.3% viewed TV (NITA-U, 2017). There are disparities in these statistics if one is interested in the finer detail such as gender gaps, “slightly more males (44.2%) watched TV compared to females 39.2%” and the urban-rural divide in terms of access to and ownership of TV let alone the digital migration dynamics.



The bigger numbers, as the statistics show us, are still in the traditional media space which space is in dire straits commercially. It will not be shocking therefore, to see radio stations in and outside Kampala locking out more voices critical of government positions as the fear of losing advertising revenue (sometimes called financial support by the line minister) is real. As advertising giants like banks, telecoms and insurance companies cut their advertising budgets to cope with the economic recession, these radios will be most affected since they are hardly profitable, anyway.

Thinking outside the box

Consequently, those who seek to advance the cause of democracy, fundamental freedoms and respect for human rights will need to pay a lot more attention to how to sustain the independent media houses and invest creatively in systems and media infrastructure for independent journalism to thrive. In particular, they will need to experiment with new models such as nonprofit journalism outfits that operate outside the commercial media realm. Through new fundraising models such as crowdsourcing, they will need to step in to provide “ventilators” in form of financial support to traditional media houses that COVID-19 pandemic may consign to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) perpetually while at the same time investing in the development of new media. There may also be need to explore the feasibility of investing in and having recourse to public broadcasting, with funding from the public and philanthropic organizations as opposed to the state or from proceeds of advertising. Indeed, for Uganda, there would be no greater contribution to arresting the democracy deficit exacerbated by the Coronavirus than putting one’s best foot forward to ensure good journalism thrives in the post COVID-19 economic hardships.

About the Uganda Transition Scenarios Thought Leadership Group – UTSTLG

We are a network of independent multi-disciplinary professionals committed to critical inquiry on contemporary and emerging governance and public policy issues in Uganda. UTSTLG is driven by a desire to be intellectually thought provoking and asking questions behind the answers. UTSTLG is hosted by the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (www.glissafrika.org). The views expressed in UTSTLG publications and think pieces do not represent the views of GLISS or the collective thinking of individual members but are the views of the authors.

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