

Vernacular Radio Broadcasting in Kenya: Issues, Perspectives and Challenges

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Abstract

Radio broadcasting in Kenya has historically been in English and Kiswahili. Kiswahili is Kenya's national and official language. Kenya boasts of a media landscape renowned for its diversity and sophistication. The radio sector is thriving, with over 100 radio stations, many catering to various local languages. Between 2015 and 2022, there has been substantial growth in both radio and TV stations. The count for radio stations surged from 120 to 228, and for TV stations, there was a remarkable increase from 6 to 182 (CA, 2023). The purpose of this paper was to analyze issues and challenges facing vernacular radio in Kenya. Data was collected through interviews and key informative interviews (KII). The results indicate that, although radio vernacular broadcast now plays a major role in creating awareness among most Kenyans at all levels through discussing issues in personal development, education, agriculture, politics & governance, and healthcare, challenges abound. The fact that Kenya's political mobilization and ethnicity are intertwined with vernacular languages and political competition is a challenge. Additionally, vernacular radio continues to become targets of political patronage and control owing to influence as reliable sources of information for communities, need for profit than social responsibility, little regard for professionalism, poor professional training, ethical foundations and expertise in media management, non-adherence in media ethics, lack of basic investigative journalism knowledge and skills, lack of support by media houses and generally, poor working conditions in vernacular radio stations. To make vernacular radio to gather and use its full potential, there is need to make vernacular radio move towards independence, make it lean towards social enterprise, ensure training and professionalism and proper remuneration of the radio personalities and make it serve the interests of the communities it serves.

Keywords: Vernacular radio, broadcasting, rural audiences, Kenya

Introduction

Kenya's media history shows that the radio landscape has always been heavily dominated by broadcasts in the two main languages, English and Kiswahili. The net effect of this, for many years, has been an exclusion of the less educated and rural audiences due to limited language proficiency in bilingual contexts which has led to exclusion of rural audiences, hindering comprehension and access to crucial information, fostering marginalization. The liberalization of airwaves and digital migration in Kenya has spurred the establishment of diverse vernacular radio stations, providing a platform for local languages and cultures. This transformative shift in the media landscape has democratized broadcasting, allowing communities to express themselves in their native tongues. The increased accessibility has empowered marginalized voices, fostering cultural representation and community engagement. This pluralistic approach not only enhances inclusivity but also reflects the nation's linguistic diversity.

In Kenya, the evolution of radio is closely intertwined with political and economic developments in the post-colonial era. The Mau Mau war, patriotic fervor, and pre-independence commitment spurred colonial policies that fostered the growth of radio broadcasting (Mbeke, 2009). Furthermore, there has been a global proliferation of radio stations in recent years, with significant expansion of vernacular and community radios in Kenya since 2000 (Myers, 2008). Factors such as robust advertising industries and a populace hungry for news and information have fueled this growth (Ismail and Dean, 2008). Additionally, disillusionment with mainstream media and the political influence of modern urban FM stations have created a conducive environment for the rise of vernacular radio (Ogola, 2011).

The Media Council of Kenya (MCK) estimates that four in every five (78%) relying on radio for information which translated to 4% improvement from 2021(74%), (MCK, 2022) or BBC (BBC World Service Trust 2007), which in 2007 had estimated a 27 per cent of the radio market. Moreover, the vernacular radio keep increasing not only their number of listeners, but also their reach in the country, which has expanded from being concentrated in the areas dominated by speakers of their languages of broadcast to national and international scales using the internet. Majority of households, 61%, in Kenya live in rural areas (KNBS 2022), highlighting the significant rural population that plays a crucial role in the nation's socio-economic fabric and development. Additionally, majority of the rural dwellers are the ones who face high literacy levels and lower electricity connection compared to most urban areas. This makes vernacular radio even more important as medium that speaks in their mother tongue becomes handy.

Kenyan Context

As the social and political landscape evolves in Kenya, vernacular radio has emerged to address the unmet needs of populations whose cultural and linguistic diversity was not adequately represented by mainstream radio stations broadcasting in official languages. These stations often fell short in catering to the specific tastes and interests of communities that spoke vernacular languages, resulting in a lack of local music, cultural content, and information provision. Particularly in regions of Kenya with rich cultural diversity, communities found themselves

underserved by mainstream media outlets primarily broadcasting in Kiswahili and English, languages not reflective of their own. This created a growing demand for platforms that would celebrate and promote local languages, music, and cultural products. Thus, vernacular radio has arisen to fulfill the needs of the population left behind by mainstream local radio stations that broadcast in official languages, failing to satisfy the appetite for local music and cultural content performed in the vernacular. Presenters in mainstream radio stations often struggle to feature songs in vernacular languages without appearing ethnically biased, leaving fans of this musical genre feeling marginalized.

This therefore explains why the liberalization of airwaves in Kenya has led to varied narratives, strengthening the connection between media and local audiences which, in itself, has led to many voices being part of the broadcasting environment in Kenya. Due to this plurality in the Kenya's media landscape, TV stations broadcasting in vernacular languages also have also sprung up with each focusing on specific community audiences including; Inooro TV (Gikuyu), Ramogi TV (Dholuo), Changei TV (Kalenjin) Musyi (Kamba TV) which all broadcast full 24 hours. In Kenya, diverse ethnic communities embrace vernacular broadcasting as a crucial means of cultural preservation and participation in the democratic processes in Kenya. This may also be because vernacular content community interests, fostering a sense of identity and unity. It serves as a vital tool for communication, information dissemination, and cultural enrichment, promoting a deeper connection with traditional values

Kenya's five major ethnic groups, constituting over 70% of the population, significantly influence vernacular radio stations. Major ethnic communities have several vernacular radio stations with the Royal Media Services, a private owned company leading with these kind of radio stations including Inooro (Kikuyu), Ramogi (Dholuo), Mulembe (Luhya), Musyi (Kamba), Muuga (Meru), Changei (Kalenjin), Egesa (Kisii), Wimwaro (Embu) Vuuka (Maragoli), Sulwe FM (Bukusu), and Maa FM (Maasai). Other vernacular FM stations include Kass FM, Kitwek FM (Kalenjin) Coro FM, Timau Radio and Kameme FM (Kikuyu), Radio Nam Lolwe, Radio Lake Victoria, Mayienga FM and Kewi Radio (Luo), Star FM (Kisii), West FM (Luhya) and (Kikuyu) Mbaitu FM (Kamba), Kaya FM (Agiriyama), Minto, Kitwek (Kipsigis), and Anguo FM (Taita). These stations play a pivotal role in preserving and promoting indigenous languages, fostering a strong sense of identity and community engagement among the majority ethnic groups in Kenya with mainstream news media and the new urban Kiswahili- and English-language FM radios.

In recent years, radio has been increasing its relevance as a source of news and information as its prevalence and audience reception has been increasing. In the last three years, 2021-2023, radio has increased audiences as a source of news in Kenya from 24, to 31 to 33 per cent in those years respectively. Additionally, generally, trends in media consumption habits also shows that radio listening has risen from 74% in 2020 to 78% in 2022 competing with television which is at 80% (MCK, 2022). The increase has been attributed to increase in listening in rural audiences compared to urban dwellers. The same report shows that media consumption in Kenya averages at 33% for both radio and television across all age groups with radio attracting more listeners

both in the morning shows(6am-10am) and (8pm-12midnight). Nationally, vernacular stations the leading radio station, Inooro FM and Kameme FM each attracted 4% of national audiences.

This Kenyan scenario is because unlike mainstream media, vernacular broadcasting prioritizes community needs and offers diverse content reflective of local interests. Radio, in particular, remains the primary medium for information dissemination, with widespread listenership across Kenya. This growth reflects advancements in information technologies and a shift towards participatory communication models aimed at rural development and empowerment. The importance of vernacular mass media in promoting cultural expression, grassroots communication, and community development. By prioritizing local languages and engaging non-literate populations, vernacular media facilitate inclusive and participatory knowledge transfer, fostering socio-economic progress in marginalized communities

Literature review

Vernacular radio broadcasting in Kenya plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural identity, fostering community cohesion, and disseminating information to diverse audiences. A literature review reveals several key themes and findings regarding the impact, challenges, and opportunities of vernacular radio in Kenya. The radio remains a crucial source of information for the majority of Kenya's rural populace, offering access to diverse content in vernacular languages. Vernacular broadcasting caters specifically to rural audiences, addressing their linguistic preferences and regional interests. However, while technology has expanded radio's reach, it also perpetuates regionalism and ethnic divisions, limiting the medium's national scope.

Vernacular broadcasting serves as a vital tool for addressing a myriad of socio-economic and political challenges in Kenya. By broadcasting in local languages, it facilitates communication on issues like ethnic tensions, human rights violations, and corruption. Tailored programs also tackle health and literacy challenges prevalent in rural areas, contributing to community empowerment and development. Studies have highlighted the significance of vernacular radio in reaching marginalized and rural populations with limited access to mainstream media (Ogola, 2005). By broadcasting in local languages, vernacular radio stations address linguistic diversity and promote inclusivity, enabling listeners to engage with content that resonates with their cultural context (Macharia, 2012), the impact of broadcasting in local languages on listeners' engagement and cultural resonance (Onger, 2020), promotion of linguistic diversity and community engagement through content that resonates with listeners' cultural contexts and empower marginalized communities, and provide platforms for cultural expression (Mwangi, & Kariuki, 2018), (Ndung'u & Kipsang 2019) and (Kimani & Nyabola, 2021).

Furthermore, vernacular radio serves as a platform for cultural preservation and expression, promoting indigenous knowledge systems, traditions, and storytelling (Kimani, 2018). It also provides a space for marginalized voices to be heard and contributes to the preservation of linguistic heritage and oral traditions (Odhiambo, 2017). However, vernacular radio faces challenges such as regulatory constraints, limited funding, and commercial pressures (Cheboi, 2015, Mutunga, L. (2018), Kamau, & Gitau, (2019) and Gathogo & Mucheru (2020).

Additionally, concerns have been raised about the potential for divisive messaging and incitement when addressing sensitive socio-political issues in local languages (Ochieng, 2019).

Despite these challenges which are related to audience preferences, with the advent of digital broadcasting and online streaming, vernacular radio stations in Kenya have expanded their reach and diversified their content offerings (Ngugi, 2020, MCK 2022). Moreover, partnerships with development organizations and collaborations with mainstream media outlets have provided opportunities for capacity-building and professionalization within the vernacular radio sector (Mwirigi & Njoroge, 2018, and Chege & Ochieng, 2019, Maina, & Ondiek, 2020).

Methodology

Adopting an exploratory research design, this study aimed to offer critical insights into the place of vernacular radio within Kenya's dynamic media landscape. It facilitated a nuanced understanding of the multitude of factors influencing the study's context, allowing for flexible and unstructured data collection. The small, non-representative sample aligned well with this approach, enabling qualitative analysis to prioritize the significance of identified issues within the radio broadcasting sector in Kenya.

This paper therefore adopted a critical perspective by conducting qualitative interviews with Kenyan journalists to interrogate the place of vernacular stations in contemporary journalism practices within the country's media landscape. Previous studies underscore journalists' suitability for such interviews, given their imperative to articulate perceptions clearly (Besley and Roberts, 2010). Here, journalists are defined as individuals employed, either full- or part-time, by for-profit, non-profit, or government-run media organizations. Interviews with producers in leading vernacular radio producers and lead hosts with 5 leading vernacular radio station in Kenya, Inooro FM, Kameme FM, Ramogi FM, Kass FM, and Musyi FM and 5 key informant interviews with key stakeholders in the radio broadcasting industry, the study sought to examine vernacular radio issues, challenges and new perspectives which are driving vernacular radio in Kenya to the next frontier.

The study included 15 journalists representing varied age groups and genders employed by prominent vernacular radio stations in Kenya. Additionally, key informants with extensive knowledge of the Kenyan media landscape were included. Interviews were conducted in person or over the phone, depending on respondents' availability. Following informed consent, journalists were queried about industry challenges and the societal impacts of different mediums, including vernacular stations. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, with an average duration of approximately 30 minutes each.

Results and discussion

The majority of respondents concurred that the radio broadcasting in Kenya has undergone rapid transformation, largely attributed to the advent of liberalization, local content generation, language issues and digital media. They unanimously acknowledged that digital media has significantly reshaped the consumption patterns of vernacular language radio broadcasts.

The consensus among respondents highlights a critical perspective on the dynamic shifts occurring within the radio broadcasting industry in Kenya. The acknowledgment of rapid change underscores the multifaceted impact of liberalization of airwaves, content diversity, language considerations, and the advent of digital media. This recognition suggests a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between regulatory reforms, content accessibility, and technological advancements shaping the industry landscape. Moreover, the unanimous agreement on the transformative influence of digital media reflects a critical awareness of evolving audience behaviors and consumption patterns. The recognition of digital media's role in altering the consumption dynamics of vernacular language radio broadcasts shows the need for a nuanced examination of technological disruptions and their implications for traditional media platforms. This critical perspective underscores the importance of adapting communication strategies and content delivery mechanisms to meet evolving audience preferences and technological advancements.

“The evolution of vernacular radio broadcasts in Kenya has been truly remarkable. Digital media has played a pivotal role, revolutionizing audience engagement and consumption habits. Witnessing this transformation underscores the power of technology to democratize access to information and culture. I have realized the profound impact of digitalization on traditional media formats. As a listener, this shift has opened up new avenues for connection and participation, prompting reflection on the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in shaping our media landscape.” K2

Vernacular radio stations are undergoing a transformative shift by embracing digital platforms, including social media, podcasts, and streaming services, to expand their reach and foster deeper engagement with audiences beyond conventional broadcast parameters. This modernization effort has yielded substantial gains, evident in the escalating audience base, with approximately 83% of Kenyans now utilizing digital platforms for radio consumption (MCK, 2022). This data underscores the profound impact of digitalization on radio broadcasting in Kenya, signaling a fundamental evolution in audience behavior and media consumption patterns.

By leveraging digital channels, vernacular radio stations have transcended geographical limitations, facilitating broader audience access and fostering interactive communication with listeners. This strategic integration of digital platforms has enhanced the stations' visibility and enriched the listener experience by offering diverse content formats and engagement opportunities. Moreover, the high adoption rate of digital platforms for radio consumption highlights the growing relevance of digital media in shaping contemporary media landscapes.

“The integration of digital platforms has reshaped the landscape of vernacular radio stations, offering a richer and more interactive experience for listeners; showing the dynamic nature of media consumption in the digital age. While the newfound accessibility and diversity of content is clear, there are potential drawbacks, such as information overload or the erosion of traditional broadcasting values. We must all think about how to strike a balance between embracing technological advancements and preserving the unique essence of vernacular radio in our rapidly evolving media landscape.” K3

To ensure that vernacular radio has catered for changing audience preferences, vernacular radio stations are diversifying their content offerings to include not only news and music but also educational programs, talk shows, and interactive segments that address contemporary issues and interests (Johnson et al. 2020). Vernacular radio is also actively engaging with their local communities through events, listener call-ins, and participatory programs, fostering a sense of belonging and community ownership of the station (Omondi and Mwangi, 2020).

Embracing new technologies like mobile broadcasting, online streaming, and digital editing tools, vernacular radio stations have elevated production standards and operational efficiency, fostering deeper audience engagement. However, amidst this technological evolution, it's imperative to critically assess potential implications. While enhancing accessibility and connectivity, overreliance on digital platforms may inadvertently dilute the authenticity and community-centric ethos of vernacular radio. Thus, while lauding advancements, it's essential to strike a balance, ensuring that technological integration enriches rather than compromises the distinctive essence of vernacular broadcasting in fostering meaningful connections and preserving cultural heritage. (Nyabuto and Ochieng, 2021).

“Using modern technologies like mobile broadcasting and online streaming, vernacular radio stations have enhanced production quality and operational efficiency, making their connections with audience even stringer. This has enriched audience experience, providing greater accessibility and diverse content options. However, we must not forget the need to preserve the authentic essence and community engagement that define vernacular radio's unique appeal in our digital era.” Said K4

The study elucidated the increasing trend of vernacular radio stations cultivating partnerships with various stakeholders, including media outlets, development organizations, and community groups. This strategic collaboration aims to extend the stations' reach, access additional resources, and foster synergies beneficial to both the station and its audience. These collaborations enable vernacular radio to stay relevant and responsive to the evolving needs and interests of its listeners (Chege & Ochieng 2019). However, while partnerships hold promise in expanding outreach and enhancing content diversity, safeguarding the integrity and autonomy of vernacular radio remains paramount. Therefore, the nature and objectives of these collaborations must continually be evaluated to ensure they align with the station's mission and values while genuinely serving the needs and interests of the audience. Striking a delicate balance between partnership-driven expansion and maintaining the station's grassroots authenticity is essential to preserve the credibility and community relevance of vernacular radio in an increasingly interconnected media landscape.

Another striking development within the rise and popularity of vernacular media has to do with the impact on individuals within the entertainment industry in Kenya (Oduor and Mutiso (2020) and Wanjiru and Kariuki (2019). Previously, musicians who produced songs in local languages faced challenges in gaining exposure through mainstream media channels that primarily focused on English and Kiswahili content. Success often required considerable investments of time and money to travel and promote their music through many means. However, with the rise of vernacular radio, these musicians now have a platform to showcase their work more

prominently. Over the past decade, numerous music stars in Kenya have risen to prominence rapidly, leveraging vernacular radio to reach wider audiences and promote their tracks. Additionally, they use vernacular radio to advertise upcoming concerts, which often yield higher earnings compared to traditional music sales, given the prevalence of piracy in the country's entertainment sector. Through vernacular media, artists have effectively advertised their performances and engaged with their fan base, contributing to their overall success and visibility in the industry.

"In the past decade, I've witnessed how vernacular radio has been a game-changer for emerging music stars, helping them gain rapid prominence. It's not just about promoting tracks; it's also about leveraging radio to advertise concerts, which often outshine traditional music sales, especially with piracy rampant in our entertainment sector. Through vernacular media, artists have found a powerful platform to connect with fans, boost visibility, and elevate their success in the industry." K1

This change underscores the importance of vernacular radio as a platform for showcasing diverse talent, supporting grassroots initiatives, and amplifying cultural heritage. The shows the symbiotic relationship between vernacular radio and the entertainment industry, with radio stations serving as key influencers and tastemakers in the promotion of Kenyan music and culture.

Vernacular radio stations in Kenya face a significant challenge in balancing the demand for entertainment with the imperative to address development issues. As audience preferences evolve, there is a growing expectation for radio programming to provide entertaining content that captivates and engages listeners. This demand for entertainment poses a dilemma for vernacular radio stations, as they must navigate between fulfilling commercial objectives and fulfilling their social responsibility to inform, educate, and empower their audience. Advertisers, driven by the pursuit of maximizing returns on investment, are increasingly diverting their advertising budgets to regional vernacular stations. These stations gain popularity by addressing local issues and news in ways that national broadcasters cannot replicate. However, the growth of vernacular radio channels brings various challenges, including content selection, workforce professionalism, and demographic dynamics of their audience. These challenges have led to issues such as accusations of hate speech and moral deficiencies

Therefore, the pressure to generate profits and remain financially viable is a distraction for vernacular radio stations, especially those in the nascent stages of development. Faced with limited resources and competing priorities, these stations have sometimes prioritized programming that attracts larger audiences and advertisers, often at the expense of addressing critical development issues affecting their communities.

"Sometimes it's a tough balancing act; succumbing to the temptation to prioritize entertainment over developmental content carries its own risks. Vernacular radio stations in Kenya play a crucial role in disseminating information, raising awareness, and facilitating dialogue on pressing social, economic, and political issues. Excluding programming on development issues

not only neglects the station's social responsibility but also undermines its potential to effect positive change and contribute to community development.” P4

To address this challenge, vernacular radio stations could strike a delicate balance between entertainment and informative content. They can explore innovative approaches to infuse educational and developmental messages into entertaining programming, thereby appealing to audience preferences while fulfilling their social responsibility. Additionally, fostering partnerships with development organizations and leveraging community engagement initiatives can help ensure that vernacular radio stations remain relevant and impactful in addressing the diverse needs and interests of their audience.

In Kenya, another important issue is the language used in broadcasting which plays a pivotal role in shaping radio audiences, impacting both listenership and non-listenership patterns. Historically, vernacular radio stations primarily operated in specific regions and catered to audiences speaking particular vernacular languages. However, over time, vernacular radio stations have undergone a significant transformation, adapting to changing socio-economic demographics and internal migration trends.

Vernacular radio stations are adjusting to the new realities in Kenya every day which has made them expand their broadcast formats to encompass regional, multi-regional, and even subnational coverage. By embracing these diverse formats, vernacular radio stations have demonstrated a remarkable level of adaptability to the evolving media landscape in Kenya. This flexibility has enabled them to extend their outreach and appeal to broader audiences beyond their traditional geographic boundaries.” K2

As a result of these changes, vernacular radio stations have emerged as influential players in Kenya's media industry. In fact, among the top 10 radio stations in the country, 50% are vernacular stations, collectively capturing 30% of the national radio listenership (Media Council of Kenya, 2021). This significant presence underscores the substantial impact and relevance of vernacular radio in Kenya's media landscape.

While vernacular radio stations have garnered a considerable audience share, it's essential to note that radio broadcasting in Kiswahili, Kenya's national language, remains dominant. Kiswahili-based radio stations command the remaining 35% of the listenership, highlighting the diverse linguistic preferences and choices among Kenyan radio audiences. Overall, the coexistence of vernacular and Kiswahili radio stations underscores the rich linguistic diversity and cultural dynamics within Kenya's media ecosystem.

Inadequate professional training results in professionals ill-prepared for their significant roles. Many journalists and some editors lack a thorough understanding of conflict-sensitive reporting principles, or they choose to disregard them, as evidenced during the January 2008 post-election violence in Kenya. This deficiency in professionalism, particularly prevalent in smaller media houses, manifests in inaccurate reporting and a lack of balance and fairness in story treatment.

“Yes, professionalism is still a challenge. Not all radio journalists are trained and in vernacular radio, the situation might be worse, and in the smaller ones, than the mainstream radio. Perhaps frequent training on professional issues may help the situation to improve.” K4

Acquiring and retaining talent poses a significant challenge for vernacular radio stations in Kenya. The recruitment of skilled professionals, particularly journalists and broadcasters fluent in local languages, faces stiff competition from mainstream media outlets. The allure of larger platforms with potentially higher salaries and better career advancement opportunities often draws talent away from vernacular radio stations. Moreover, the career growth prospects for journalists and broadcasters in the vernacular radio sector are limited compared to those in mainstream media. Many professionals perceive working in vernacular radio as a stepping stone rather than a long-term career option, further exacerbating the turnover rate. Retaining qualified personnel is equally challenging. Vernacular radio stations often struggle to provide competitive compensation packages and opportunities for professional development and advancement. As a result, talented individuals seek employment elsewhere, leading to a constant cycle of recruitment and turnover.

Related to this is training in media ethics which is either lacking or inadequate. As a result, corruption is pervasive among correspondents, salaried reporters, editors and even senior managers. There is a lack of basic investigative journalism knowledge and skills because of inadequate training and lack of support by media houses.

“Most of the editors and journalists in radio (and media) are never trained or sensitized from time to time over changing media landscape and emerging ethical issues and challenges. It’s a mixture of many challenges as we move forward.” Retorted K4

The language used in vernacular radio broadcasting in Kenya presents a significant challenge, particularly in terms of professional training and standards. Unlike traditional journalism, which typically requires formal training in English or Kiswahili, vernacular media often lacks such structured requirements. As a result, individuals from diverse backgrounds, including comedians, musicians, and those simply known for their conversational skills, now find themselves behind the microphone. This has sometimes led to broadcasts that lack professionalism and fail to resonate with the audience or address important socio-economic issues due to challenges related to the need for fluency and accuracy in various vernacular languages, alongside potential pressure to conform to standardized language norms and avoid biases.

“We have this big challenge about the language of broadcasting in Kenya. Vernacular radio journalists some of whom are not even trained journalists face challenges in the need to maintain neutrality and avoid biases while reporting on sensitive issues within their communities. Additionally, balancing linguistic authenticity with professional standards and ethical considerations presents an ongoing challenge for vernacular radio journalists as they strive to effectively communicate with their audiences and fulfill their journalistic responsibilities. P1

The emergence of comedians as prominent figures in vernacular radio broadcasting, despite lacking journalistic training, poses a challenge due to potential implications for the credibility and integrity of news and information dissemination. While comedians entertain and engage audiences, their lack of journalistic training has a potential to compromise the quality and accuracy of content, leading to misinformation or trivialization of important issues. The Media Council of Kenya notes this as it indicates that it is due to lack of quality control and respect for moral and cultural sensitivities loaded with race, religion, and ethnic stereotypes, disability, physical appearance or social status (MCK, 2014). Practically, it has also been seen that, their focus on humor and entertainment has, sometimes, overshadowed the role of journalism in informing and educating the public, potentially undermining the credibility of vernacular radio as a source of reliable news and information. This disparity highlights the need for specialized training and support within the radio industry in Kenya to ensure high-quality broadcasting that serves the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of Kenyan audiences.

In the midst of the tumultuous media landscape in Kenya, and indeed on a global scale, vernacular radio stations grapple with challenging economic conditions characterized by dwindling revenues. Consequently, the working environment within many of these stations has deteriorated significantly, leading to increasingly unsatisfactory conditions. This is in tandem with what was found by Okoth, 2015 who argues that overcrowded newsrooms and studios are a common sight in vernacular radio stations, often devoid of adequate occupational safety measures. Furthermore, transportation for assignments, particularly for vernacular radio journalists, is frequently deficient, exacerbating the already challenging circumstances they face.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, vernacular radio stations in Kenya, deeply ingrained in local communities, served as vital conduits to reach the masses, especially in areas with limited mainstream media access. Primarily, the station acted as a primary source for disseminating vital updates on the pandemic, including government directives and health protocols. Broadcasting in local languages ensured accessibility to a broader audience, including those with limited proficiency in national languages. The stations also assumed an educational role, offering valuable insights and guidance on navigating the challenges posed by COVID-19. Through informative programming and expert interviews, listeners gained essential knowledge on symptoms, transmission, and preventive measures, while dispelling misconceptions and rumors.

Although this is true, journalists working in vernacular radio stations across Kenya faced unprecedented challenges, particularly concerning their financial stability. Many of these journalists experienced substantial salary cuts, with some enduring reductions of up to half of their usual earnings. This financial strain persisted for an extended period, exacerbating the hardships faced by media professionals in the country. The impact of these salary cuts extended beyond immediate financial concerns, significantly affecting the livelihoods of journalists in vernacular radio stations. The reduced income posed significant challenges to meeting basic needs and maintaining a decent standard of living, further exacerbating the economic pressures faced by media professionals during an already tumultuous time. These poor working conditions not only imposed hardships on individual journalists but also had broader implications for the quality and integrity of journalistic work in the radio industry. Financial distress undermines

journalists' ability to perform their duties effectively, potentially compromising the accuracy, impartiality, and thoroughness of their reporting.

There is a correlation between low pay and increased susceptibility to corruption among journalists is a concerning issue that warrants attention. When journalists are inadequately compensated for their work, they may become more vulnerable to unethical practices, such as accepting bribes or engaging in other forms of corruption to supplement their income. (Gathara, 2018).

“Now than ever before, vernacular radio face real challenge. You know most radio journalists in big broadcasting houses in Kenya have to follow up with those from their television counterparts for them to get to assignments or get transport or even depend on copy brought in by other journalists. It’s worse for correspondents who are in far flung areas chasing stories in the field. Low pay, morale and working conditions make corruption and easy option. This denies the radio audiences the real news.” P2

Conclusion

The emergence and expansion of vernacular media in Kenya represent a significant in Kenya’s broadcast scene. Vernacular radio stations are now bridging the information gap, empowering previously marginalized communities to make more informed decisions and participate actively in civic life. Moreover, these platforms facilitate better economic decision-making, business expansion, and overall improvement in living standards. However, progress is gradual, hindered by challenges such as poor electricity penetration, necessitating the use of dry cells to power radios, thereby adding a new financial burden for listeners. Despite these obstacles, the growing influence of vernacular radio is gradually transforming the socio-economic landscape, leveling the playing field and fostering greater inclusivity in access to information and opportunities.

Training and professionalism as well as proper remuneration of the radio personalities involved will be key to achieve the scaling up of the positive economic impact that these vernacular radio in Kenya can have on the listeners. A careful look at the independence of some of the programmes that may be better tailored for maximum benefits to the audience reveals possible elements of interference from the commercial sponsors, who at times tend to demand the use of their products rather than objective practices which could lead to economic gains for the listeners. The potential is still huge and it may take a while before the quality of the programmes change in a way that listeners will have no difficulties in following closely.

Overall, vernacular radio stations must strike a delicate balance between entertainment and informative content. They can explore innovative approaches to infuse educational and developmental messages into entertaining programming, thereby appealing to audience preferences while fulfilling their social responsibility. Additionally, fostering partnerships with development organizations and leveraging community engagement initiatives can help ensure that vernacular radio stations remain relevant and impactful in addressing the diverse needs and

interests of their audience. Addressing these talent acquisition and retention challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Vernacular radio stations must explore innovative strategies to attract and retain talent, such as offering competitive salaries, providing opportunities for skill development and career advancement, and fostering a supportive work environment that values the unique contributions of its employees. Additionally, enhancing the visibility and prestige of vernacular radio as a viable career path can help attract a steady stream of qualified professionals passionate about serving their local communities through broadcasting.

Addressing challenges to improve working conditions, including remuneration, adequate resources, and support mechanisms for journalists, are critical for sustaining a vibrant and ethical media landscape. Additionally, efforts to combat corruption and promote transparency within the media industry are essential for preserving public trust and confidence in journalism. By prioritizing the welfare of journalists and fostering a culture of integrity and professionalism, Kenya can take care of the importance of the media in promoting democracy, accountability, and social progress.

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