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A Newsroom Divided: Kenya, the Election Crisis, and the Nation Media Group

In mid-January 2008, violent confrontations in Kenya were making international headlines daily. It was three weeks since a closely contested presidential election had ended in dispute, and the country had exploded into tribal violence. The death toll had reached 650 and over a quarter million people had been displaced from their homes.¹ Incumbent President Mwai Kibaki and his challenger, Raila Odinga, remained locked in a standoff. Rumors of killings and other brutality ripped through political rallies and across national radio as well as the international media.

At the Nation Media Group, Kenya's foremost news organization, the fighting took an unprecedented toll on staff and newsroom morale. An institution that had long prided itself on professionalism found itself riven by ethnic divisions that editors had not suspected existed—at least not so visibly. Reporters who only weeks earlier had been friends as well as colleagues would barely speak to one another. Suspicion greeted most editorial decisions. In the newsroom, individuals chose to speak exclusively in their vernacular—deliberately excluding those from other ethnic groups.

Wangethi Mwangi was editorial director of the Nation Media Group (NMG), which included the *Daily Nation* newspaper, NTV television, radio, as well as other smaller news outlets. To Mwangi, the crisis threatened the credibility of the news organization he had served for nearly 30 years.² If Nation Group reporters, both print and broadcast, could no longer separate their personal lives from their professional ones, how could they fairly report on the political tensions

¹ Jeffrey Gettleman, "At Least Seven Killed in Violence Across Kenya," *New York Times*, January 21, 2008.

² Details from interviews with Wangethi Mwangi in Nairobi, Kenya, on October 4 and 5, 2011. All direct quotes and attributions to Mwangi, unless otherwise noted, are from these interviews.

dividing the country? If editors lost the respect of their staff, they could not function. That the press mirrored society was a truism. But news organizations were not intended to play out society's divisions within the walls of the newsroom.

By mid-January, Mwangi realized that the organization was barely functioning as a news operation. With his editors, he brainstormed a strategy that might reunite the newsroom. The divisions between and among management and staff transcended any single policy solution. Indeed, each measure that Mwangi and his editors had so far taken to preserve NMG's mission to report on the crisis impartially had been interpreted within the newsroom as evidence of his own partisan agenda.

Mwangi, aware that he had to act quickly, was tempted to adopt the most promising proposal: invite a group of editors and journalists to an offsite meeting. The question was, to do what? To plan a newsroom strategy? To restore his own credibility with his reporters? To speak freely? If Mwangi opened the floor to a free and open exchange of views, what might be the risks? "Airing grievances" could easily turn into *ad hominem* attacks, merely intensifying the hostility. How could he guard against that, ensuring instead that the meeting would clear the air and return the newsroom to its job—helping Kenyans understand and deal with the political and tribal dynamics playing out in communities across the country.

A Newly Free Press

The 2007 elections were a vital story for the Nation Media Group. The *Daily Nation* was widely considered Kenya's newspaper of record. Its affiliated television and radio stations were part of the largest publishing company in east and central Africa.³ All three were housed together in central Nairobi. Editorial Director Mwangi knew that Kenyans were looking to NMG's print, radio and television reports for impartial coverage of the vote and its aftermath.

The tradition of an independent press was still relatively new to Kenya. When Mwangi joined the *Daily Nation* in 1980 as a subeditor (copy editor), the media was deeply intertwined with government. Daniel arap Moi had recently become president. Like many African leaders, Moi expected the press to act as an instrument of his administration.⁴ Under Moi, every news detail counted. Mwangi recalls an unwritten rule that newspapers place the president's picture on the front page for even the most trivial stories, like his Sunday church attendance. Journalists were also expected to make prominent mention of Moi's political allies. "You dared not leave out any one of them in the story," says Mwangi.

³ Gerald Loughran, "Birth of a Nation: The Story of Newspapers in Kenya," I.B Tauris, 2010, p. ix. As of 2005, Nation Media Group owned 15 media products including radio, TV, newspapers and magazines in both Kenya and Uganda; in 2007, it opened the *Business Daily* and NTV Uganda. NMG ranked No. 6 on the Nairobi Stock Exchange.

⁴ George Ogola, "The Political Economy of the Media in Kenya: From Kenyatta's Nation-Building Press to Kibaki's Local-Language FM Radio," *Africa Today*, Bloomington: Spring 2011. Vol. 57, Issue 3, pp. 76-95, 115 (21 pp.)

Otherwise, the roof would fall down on you. [And] of course you couldn't investigate the nastiness in government, the misconduct of ministers and MPs, the corruption in government. You had to tread very, very carefully.⁵

Moi exercised considerable power over the press, particularly after a 1982 attempted coup when he pushed through parliament a constitutional amendment making Kenya officially a one-party state. The penalties for opposing him could be severe. According to one press history, Moi used state machinery to detain opposition politicians, journalists, newspaper editors and university lecturers. From 1988-90, he banned close to 20 publications.⁶ By the late 1980s, however, a steep economic decline had begun to cut into Moi's dominance.

Force for reform. In the early 1990s, the Nation Media Group joined forces with pro-reform civil society groups, including the Law Society of Kenya and religious leaders, to push for reform. In 1992, Moi under pressure reinstated a multiparty system; his opponents claimed victory. "That was when we knew we had a voice," says NMG's Mwangi. The introduction of political pluralism allowed for some liberalization of the press and an injection of foreign capital into the media sector. NMG itself secured radio and television licenses, and expanded into Uganda and Tanzania.

While Moi ran for president and won in both 1992 and 1997, by 2002 his influence was on the wane; he announced he would retire. During the 2002 campaign, NMG did its best to ensure that Moi would hold to his promise. "Kenyans weren't quite sure that he wouldn't behave like every big African dictator, where, at the very last minute, they renege on their promise and decide they're going to run again," recalls Mwangi. "So we came together internally and agreed that any story about the elections would make sure to make repeated mention of the fact that Moi is not running."

Kibaki, candidate of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), ran and won handily. But despite pre-election promises, Kibaki waited until 2005 to present the nation with a new constitution. In it, he reneged on an informal agreement to create a new post of prime minister for Raila Odinga—his partner in the Rainbow Coalition. The draft constitution also omitted promised press freedoms.⁷ The public soundly defeated the constitutional referendum by a margin of 3.5 to 2.5 million votes.⁸ Kibaki responded by firing his entire cabinet.⁹ Odinga then founded the Orange Democratic Movement party as a vehicle to contend for the presidency. The stage was set for the 2007 presidential campaign.

⁶ Ogola, "The Political Economy of the Media in Kenya."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Marc Lacey, "Kenya Voters Rebuff Leader On Revamping Constitution," *New York Times*, November 23, 2005.

⁹ Marc Lacey, "World Briefing|Africa: Kenya: President Dismisses Entire Cabinet," *New York Times*, November 24, 2005.

The 2007 election was important both domestically and internationally. Kenya could boast one of the liveliest multiparty political systems in Africa.¹⁰ The economy was expanding at one of the fastest rates on the continent.¹¹ The capital, Nairobi, had emerged as a regional diplomatic hub. A successful election would signal both to Kenyans and the international community that the country had come politically and democratically of age.¹²

Simmering Campaign

Nation Media Group wanted to do their part to promote free and fair elections as a symbol of Kenya's full commitment to democracy. "At every meeting we had with our editorial management and leadership teams," recalls Mwangi, "[it] was drummed into our heads that our role should go beyond just reporting the news. We should factor into our minds that whatever we do, we are acting as agents of change, positive social change, and therefore, that should drive the selection of our news."

Yet the campaign had ignited latent ethnic tensions among Kenya's tribes. President Kibaki was a member of the politically and economically dominant Kikuyu tribe. He had overseen the country's economic growth. But he was also widely accused of favoritism and of failing to root out corruption.¹³ Opposition leader Odinga was a member of the Luo tribe, Kenya's fourth largest, and had run a populist campaign that sought to unite Kenya's other 40-odd tribes in opposition to Kibaki's alleged Kikuyu favoritism.¹⁴

The country was on edge in the final days before the vote as the campaigns traded accusations of planned vote rigging. That rhetoric sparked isolated instances of violence and raised concerns that a close outcome could be viewed as illegitimate or, worse, plunge the country into chaos.¹⁵ Eight people were killed in the lead-up to the vote. Kikuyus, Embu and Meru largely supported Kibaki, while Luos, some Luhyas and Kalenjins (Moi's tribe) lined up behind Odinga.¹⁶

In advance of the poll on Thursday, December 27, the *Daily Nation* and NTV dispatched reporters into the field. They fanned out across the country, including the volatile central Rift Valley, where tribal resentments dated back to the 1960s as a result of perceived Kikuyu land

¹⁰ Joshua Hammer, "The African Front," *New York Times*, December 23, 2007.

¹¹ Hammer, "African Front." The rate was 5.7 percent annual growth.

¹² George Wachira, Thomas Arendshorst and Simon M. Charles, "Making Peace in the Post Election Crisis in Kenya-2008," *Nairobi Peace Initiative-Africa*, January, 2010, p.1.

¹³ Loughran, "Birth of a Nation."

¹⁴ Jeffrey Gettleman, "With Half of Vote Counted, Kenyan Opposition Is Poised to Sweep," *New York Times*, December 29, 2007. Luos represented 13 percent of Kenya's population.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Gettleman, "Election Rules Complicate Kenya Race," *New York Times*, December 25, 2007.

¹⁶ Loughran, "Birth of a Nation."

grabs.¹⁷ Mwangi and other top editors were confident that the Nation Media Group was well positioned to cover the election results comprehensively and fairly.

Election Returns

Mwangi watched the election returns in his office, but occasionally wandered into the newsroom where two television screens broadcast the results. He first realized that some of the national political and ethnic tensions may have crept into the newsroom shortly after the polls closed. It was hard not to notice that staff stood divided between the two screens watching coverage by different television stations. They openly cheered early vote counts depending on the ethnicity of the candidate shown to have captured the lead.

Mwangi was concerned. He had specifically instructed NMG journalists to leave their politics at the door of the building. But he trusted the partisanship would pass as reporters returned to their computers to work. The early returns suggested a sweep for the opposition. With half the vote counted by Friday night, Odinga led Kibaki 57 percent to 39 percent.¹⁸ Moreover, several of Kibaki's key advisors—including the foreign minister, the defense minister, and the vice president—had lost their parliamentary seats and therefore their jobs in government. However, final results came in only slowly. As the night wore on, Odinga's camp grumbled that the Electoral Commission of Kenya was intentionally delaying the vote counting process.

Computer crash. NMG had, with some fanfare, set up its own vote-counting software. This was intended to act as an independent check on official tallies. The news organization had also posted citizen observers at multiple local polling places to monitor proceedings. Then on Friday night, the vote-counting software crashed with no plausible technical explanation. Frantic efforts to restart it failed.

Inside the newsroom, the reaction was immediate, and startling. Accusations of sabotage swept the building. The whispers grew louder when many of the citizen vote monitors suddenly—and also without explanation—stopped filing reports. Suspensions intensified on Saturday, December 29, when a crush of returns came in for Kibaki. To his dismay, Mwangi began to hear speculation that management was working on behalf of Kibaki. “Everybody was suspecting everybody else,” he says.

We were suspecting some of our directors. They were suspecting journalists. Journalists were suspecting commercial people who were helping at the tallying desk. And everybody—it was just a mess.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Gettleman, “Signs in Kenya That Killings Were Planned,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2007.

¹⁸ Gettleman, “With Half of Vote Counted, Kenyan Opposition Is Poised to Sweep.”

On Sunday afternoon, the Electoral Commission announced that Kibaki had won with a final vote tally of 46 percent against Raila Odinga's 44 percent. Within an hour, Kibaki was sworn in. Minutes later, mobs of young men marched out of Kibera, a Nairobi slum that was home to over a quarter of a million people, brandishing sticks and machetes and throwing stones. They tore down shacks and lit tires. The government flooded the streets with police. Soon there were reports from across the country that mobs were dragging people from their homes and beating them to death.¹⁹

As Kibaki's victory was announced, Mwangi heard the knot of reporters that had been glued to one TV screen cheer the president's victory, while the journalists sympathetic to Odinga openly despaired. What, wondered Mwangi, did the candid political comments signify?

Covering the violence

Then he had no time to wonder. Mwangi immediately had his hands full organizing coverage of the crisis. "You started seeing pictures of people in the streets with weapons, burning whatever they came across, burning vehicles, stoning anybody they came across, and very sad scenes of people running away," says Mwangi. Some citizens called the paper for help. Mwangi recalls:

In the newsroom suddenly the phone would not stop ringing. You would have people calling from as far away as Kisumu and Eldoret talking about militias marching towards them and asking us to call whoever we could in the government establishment to send rescue or police to rescue them or shield them from these attackers.

Mwangi met daily with his editorial team. The group included Group Managing Editor Joseph Odindo, Managing Editor of the *Daily Nation* Bernard Nderitu, Editor of the *Sunday Nation* Mutuma Mathiu, news manager of Nation Television Emmanuel Juma, and Group Training Editor Peter Mwesige. First and foremost, they worried about reporters' personal safety. Fighting was particularly intense in the Rift Valley, where several NMG correspondents were trapped. "I remember one incident, one reporter in Kisumu calling me," says Mwangi.

And he just broke down on the telephone. From where he was standing, I imagine the street, he could see gangs of people approaching him and he had nowhere to run. So I told him, find the quickest shelter that you can get to. Hide there and don't get out until we get somebody to you.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Gettleman, "Disputed Vote Plunges Kenya Into Bloodshed," *New York Times*, December 31, 2007.

They debated what to do if a reporter were killed. It was hard to predict the consequences, both to morale within the newsroom and to the objectivity of future reporting.²⁰ Chair Francis Okello convened a series of Editorial Board Committee (EBC) meetings to deliberate and work with management on the way forward.²¹ In early January, the editors decided to bring reporters back from the field, at least temporarily.

Naming names. Second on their agenda was a delicate matter: how to identify warring groups without inciting additional, retaliatory attacks. “One of the questions we asked ourselves as the pictures began rolling on television, you see people wielding machetes and wooden clubs and stuff,” recalls Mwangi, “was how do you identify these groups?” NMG already had editorial guidelines on how to avoid inciting violence. They read in part:

News views or comments relating to ethnic or religious disputes/clashes should be published after proper verification of facts and presented with due caution and restraint in a manner which is conducive to the creation of an atmosphere congenial to national harmony, reconciliation, amity and peace. Sensational, provocative, and alarming headlines are to be avoided. News reports or commentaries should not be written in a manner likely to inflame passions, aggravate the tension or accentuate the strained relations between communities concerned. Equally so, articles with the potential to exacerbate communal animosity should be avoided.²²

But what did that mean when the nation was on the verge of civil war? Africa Network Executive Director Charles Obbo, for one, favored full disclosure. To do less, he asserted, took the Nation outside the realm of journalism and into diplomacy. But Mwangi decided otherwise. The risk of fanning the violence was too great. Instead, euphemisms would be invoked and reports on tribal attacks would refer only to “members of a certain community” attacking “members of another community.”

The issue arose immediately. On January 2, hundreds of Kikuyu sought refuge inside a Kenya Assemblies of God church in Kiambaa, just outside Eldoret. The next morning, a mob doused the church with gasoline and set it on fire. Thirty people were killed and dozens more hospitalized with severe burns.²³ The *New York Times* reported it as a straight news story, naming the perpetrators and the victims, and noting that many were women and children. It made

²⁰ Interview with Charles Obbo in Nairobi on October 12, 2011. All further quotes from Obbo, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

²¹ The EBC was proactive in engaging with opinion leaders on all sides early in the crisis. Among other moves, it encouraged the Nation Group editorial leadership to host meetings off-site on what all could consider neutral ground.

²² The Nation Media Group, Limited Editorial Policy Guidelines and Objectives. Revised September 2003, pg. 13.

²³ Loughlan, “Birth of a Nation,” pg. 289.

comparisons to Rwanda.²⁴ The BBC ran images of burned children's clothing smoldering amidst the ruins of the church.

But Mwangi insisted on strict adherence to the *Nation* editorial policy guidelines, which forbade mention of ethnic identity in stories about community conflict. These extraordinary editorial measures could easily have strained morale in a united newsroom. But the *Nation* was not just covering the hostilities; it mirrored them.

Living the Divisions

Mwangi began to hear about newsroom incidents in which journalists took sides along tribal lines. For example, reporters—both in social conversation and when discussing stories—were breaking into tribal groups and speaking in their vernacular instead of the national languages of Kiswahili and English. Mwangi wondered whether at some level, NMG's journalists had abandoned the professional media values of objectivity and impartiality. "When you see that kind of behavior, it worries you a lot," says Mwangi. "It makes you wonder whether the stories they write are based on events they have truly witnessed, or if there's some political coloring based on their political affiliations."

These divisions hardened as the violence increasingly affected journalists personally. Some reporters' family homes were burned to the ground.²⁵ Others were threatened in the field. One Luo reporter threw his Kikuyu girlfriend out of their home. "The mood in the newsroom was very, very bad," recalls Group Managing Editor Joseph Odindo, Mwangi's top lieutenant and a Luo.²⁶ He saw a definite effect on journalistic impartiality. "Our reporters started taking sides [based] on their own ethnic identity and political affiliation, and it affected their judgment of what is news and what is not news," he recalls.

The circumstances made it difficult for editors even to assign stories. For instance, political rallies were sometimes held in the vernacular. That meant sending a reporter who spoke Kikuyu to a rally for Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU). "But then by definition," says Odindo, "it meant that they were likely to be politically aligned to support the PNU." It was difficult for Odindo to determine from the copy whether a reporter might have left out material to protect ethnic interests, or whether a selected story angle was helpful to the reporter's preferred party or candidate rather than newsworthy. Some mornings he resorted to cross checking the *Daily Nation's* coverage with stories in competitor papers. But he wasn't sure if he could trust the work of their reporters any more than his own.

²⁴ Jeffrey Gettleman, "Kenya Kikuyus, Long Dominant, Are Now Routed," *New York Times*, January 7, 2008.

²⁵ Details from interview with Nation Group HR staff on October 3, 2011.

²⁶ Details from interviews with Joseph Odindo in Nairobi, Kenya, on October 3 and 11, 2011. All direct quotes and attributions to Odindo, unless otherwise noted, are from these interviews.

In the broadcast division, NTV News Manager Emmanuel Juma likewise began to suspect that some of his correspondents were withholding footage from their editors. “You really had to be sure that they were showing you everything that they had shot from locations,” says Juma.

They would go to a place where Kikuyus had been attacking, or Luos had been attacking, but they would choose to play it down because at that time, they [didn’t] want the side that they [supported] to be seen as the one causing all the trouble.

Making his job even more difficult, Juma was often unsure whether suspected discrepancies in reporting lay with his journalists or their sources. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the church attack, the first NTV journalist to return from the field delivered what seemed an unlikely report that tens of thousands of Kalenjin youth had torched the building, killing hundreds of Kikuyu women and children. “Then you say, ‘Hold on a minute, tens of thousands? Have you seen them?’” recalls Juma. “You had to know who you were getting your information from because... every side wants to be seen as the victim.”²⁷

Credibility. By mid-January, Mwangi began to realize that he was losing credibility in the newsroom. As the crisis deepened, he had repeatedly made editorial judgment calls on a case-by-case basis. “I would look at the most sensitive [stories] and edit them to suit, or to make them safer, if you like,” he says. It was highly unusual for him to be involved in editorial decisions, and the newsroom took note. Reporters of differing ethnicities were abuzz with theories that—because Mwangi himself was Kikuyu—he was trying to twist the coverage to suit Kikuyu interests. Indeed, almost every decision he made aimed at ensuring impartial coverage had the converse effect of inflaming fears and in turn deepening divisions.

No decision was more damaging to him than his policy not to name names. Many saw it as evidence that he was trying to cover up crimes. As one history stated: “In choosing not to publish all the facts, the *Nation’s* editorial decisions and thus its stance as an independent communicator were laid open to question.”²⁸ Even Charles Obbo, who understood Mwangi’s intent, was unhappy. “The Nation ceased to be a media house,” he recalls, “and became a peace and reconciliation center where the cold-hearted business of reporting the facts took second place to things like saving the country and reducing the violence.” Meanwhile, persistent rumors circulated that NMG management—suspected of Kikuyu and hence Kibaki sympathies—had deliberately sabotaged the vote tallying system after the election. “The journalists were forcing [me] into a situation where I would have to call them and justify my presence in the newsroom,” recalls Mwangi.

²⁷ Interview with Emmanuel Juma in Nairobi, Kenya, on October 4, 2011. All further quotes from Juma, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

²⁸ Loughran, “Birth of a Nation.”

A Strategy to Reunite

Mwangi knew he had to reestablish his credibility, not just for his own sake but for the sake of the news organization and its mission. To try to lay to rest the stories about the vote tallying software, he and the company's Editorial Board Committee agreed it was imperative to investigate the failure. Two Ugandans on the staff—Obbo and Group Training Editor Mwesige—were assigned the task. The EBC hoped the two might have more credibility than Kenyans. Mwangi also met with reporters such as NTV's Robert Nangila. Nangila argued that Mwangi had to redeploy reporters to the Rift Valley if NMG was to maintain its authoritative voice with the Kenyan people.²⁹ Mwangi agreed and authorized Nangila to assemble a team of volunteers to travel to Eldoret.

But this was not enough. He had to find a way to defuse the tensions in the newsroom, or the paper would be unable to do its job. In the second week of January, he called a meeting of his senior editorial team. "Will it be said that in our time the Nation failed in its duties to Kenyans and was unable to handle this national crisis?" he asked. He challenged them to find a way to turn the situation around.³⁰

Over the next few days, several ideas for reconciliation surfaced. No one remembers who proposed it first, but the suggestion to gain greatest traction was to hold a physical meeting, an event at which individuals would be encouraged to talk freely about the newsroom's culture and their own feelings of anger or injury. Mwangi was intrigued. Giving staff a forum to talk with impunity about their concerns might re-establish their trust in him, as well as one another. Such a meeting might also yield consensus policies that would solve some of the editorial problems that had seized up the newsroom. He went to CEO Linus Gitahi, who agreed that a meeting might be worth a try.

But the risks were high. Such a meeting could turn into a free-for-all, a shouting match that exacerbated instead of calming divisions. It could result in an all-out attack on Mwangi's own leadership. Was a meeting the right choice? Maybe it was preferable to hold one-on-one meetings with aggrieved individuals? Or to ask each editorial department to discuss its own issues? Maybe he should invite CEO Gitahi to address the assembled staff—a rally-the-troops approach.

If he called a meeting, what should the conditions be? Should he open it to all staff? Or restrict it to senior editors and reporters? Should they meet at the Nation Media Group building, or offsite? Then there was the question of agenda. Should there be one? Did he have to justify NMG's editorial policies? Was it appropriate to take notes? Mwangi certainly had to do something: the

²⁹ Interview with Robert Nangila on October 5, 2011. All further quotes from Nangila, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

³⁰ Odindo interview, October 11, 2011.

current situation was untenable, and if he didn't move fast, the organization's ability to cover the country's politics might be compromised for years to come.