

Covid-19 and Alternative Media in Kenya: Case Studies

Antoine Kauffer

▶ **To cite this version:**

Antoine Kauffer. Covid-19 and Alternative Media in Kenya: Case Studies. 2020, https://mambo.hypotheses.org/2826. halshs-03078601

HAL Id: halshs-03078601
https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03078601

Submitted on 16 Dec 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike| 4.0 International License

INSTITUT FRANÇAIS DE RECHERCHE EN AFRIQUE
FRENCH INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN AFRICA

MAMBO!
XVII (3), 2020
COVID-19 Special Papers

Covid-19 and Alternative Media in Kenya
Case Studies

Antoine Kauffer

Citer:
KAUFFER, Antoine. 2020. Covid-19 and Alternative Media in Kenya: Case Studies. *Mambo!* vol. XVII, no. 3. URL: https://mambo.hypotheses.org/2826

The author: With a dual scientific and literary background gained in Paris, São Paulo and Cambridge, Antoine Kauffer developed his professional experiences at a think tank specialized in the culture and media sectors, then as part of a scientific heritage house where he oversaw editorial and sustainable development projects. Drawing on his international exposure, he then embarked upon a research trip through East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda). He now conducts research on literary and artistic creativity in the region and cartography local socio-cultural initiatives in the form of bi-monthly newsletters.

Abstract: By focusing on the Kenyan case studies of a news platform, *The Elephant*, and a blog, *Bikozulu*, this article studies the way in which information is treated or produced in the context of a public health crisis, in this instance the Covid-19 pandemic. It aims to address the notion of alternative media, creativity and online audience, and more broadly access to different types of information in the contemporary period.

Translated by Laura Garmeson. French version: https://elam.hypotheses.org/3182

Published: September 21, 2020.

***

Author's note. I wish to highlight two important considerations as a preliminary note:
1. This text is the result of ongoing research, which is by no means definitive in nature. It is a contextual study informed by field work conducted in Nairobi between March and July 2020[1] and necessarily adapted to the conditions imposed by the measures taken to combat the spread of the virus Covid-19.
This work is all the more closely linked to this context at the time of writing, July 2020, given that the public health crisis is worsening in Kenya, with a significant acceleration in the number of cases testing positive for Covid-19 since June 2020.
2. Amid this changing context, what I propose in this paper, rather than just facts and figures, is to offer some keys to understanding aspects of Kenya's media and cultural landscape.

[1] I would like to thank the entire team at IFRA who have given me a warm welcome and much-appreciated advice. I would also like to thank everyone who agreed to respond to my questions.



Poster campaign on Covid-19 in Nairobi, 22 May 2020. Photo: Antoine Kauffer.

"In times of crisis, Kenyans turn to being creative. These are the times when the best humour comes out, when the great literary works are written. Kenyans turn back to the arts to find languages." It was with these words that Oyunga Pala, blogger and editorial director of the media outlet *The Elephant*, explained in an interview conducted at the end of May 2020 some of the few positive aspects to emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. According to his experience, the public health crisis in Kenya has awoken creative potential and the need for new horizons of imagination. But where are these creations being conceived? Where are they expressed? And what impact are they having on public opinion and the political classes? It is through the lens of these questions that I have been examining the coverage of the Covid-19 crisis in Kenya by focusing on certain media platforms, sidestepping my initial research objective, which is online literary creativity.

It proves useful to chart a brief timeline of the situation surrounding Covid-19 in Kenya. Since this crisis is part of an evolving situation, it is too soon to determine its milestones, particularly in any objective sense[2]. A convenient way to establish a chronology is to reference events that have punctuated the media landscape—that of the traditional outlets at least—in their coverage of the pandemic: the successive announcements of President Uhuru Kenyatta regarding the development of the situation concerning the virus in Kenya. As of 20 July 2020, the Kenyan president had issued nine speeches on the pandemic[3]: on 15 March, then on 25 March, 6 April, 16 April, 25 April, 16 May, 23 May, 6 June and 7 July

[2] Without repeating the historiographical debates on the notion of "event," it should be noted that a multitude of chronologies of the pandemic could be established according to the criteria used (levels of infected persons, geographical expansion by county, occupancy rate of hospital infrastructures, etc.). The absence of precise data for each of this criterion complexifies the establishment of such a chronology in the case of Kenya. I am interested here in the coverage of the pandemic by certain media only, and I have tried to identify their own rhythm of coverage of the crisis, clearly tied up with Kenya's political agenda.
[3] Written transcripts of these speeches can be found in the "Statements & Speeches" section on the official website of the President's office: https://www.president.go.ke/category/speeches/.

2020. This political calendar has influenced many media outlets in their coverage of the pandemic.[4]

We should highlight two further events relating to access to information on the virus: the creation of a Wikipedia[5] page on the situation in the country, concurrently with the identification of Kenya's first case of Covid-19 on 13 March 2020; and the partnership established between Facebook and the Kenyan Ministry of Health followed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in early April 2020. Without listing all the initiatives seeking to provide or relay information on the pandemic, it is important to reference these elements in a country where the use of the internet and social media as sources of information, particularly in urban areas, is extremely widespread.

Keeping in mind this intersection between political decisions and media coverage, let's remind ourselves of certain general trends surrounding the production and consumption of information during times of crisis. If we first take the audience's perspective, two elements come to the fore: the need to access information that is easily identifiable to the reader or listener, in other words information that is relevant to their daily life and immediate environment[6]; and the search for reliable content based on facts that have been proven and scientifically verified. At the other end of the information chain, the content providers are working under abnormal conditions (limited access to the field, contradictory and changing information, relative reliability of the available statistical data, information overload…) and are subject to constant pressure from the opinion of a public eager to consume news in real time.

The simultaneous intensification of public expectations on the one hand and the conditions of information production on the other becomes increasingly complex in contemporary times, where content producers (journalists, bloggers, specialists…) want to instigate and maintain direct contact with the public, particularly through social media, where they can be addressed directly or where they can choose to extend and clarify the thoughts laid out in their initial publication.

These are the general trends. Let's now return to the specific case of Kenya, where radio and television make up the mass media and social networks (led by Twitter and Facebook) constitute a news source favoured by the population.[7] The written press thus acts as an accurate reflection of the media spectrum in Kenya, and the so-called "alternative" media, which tends to be online, forms an even more specific subsection. This in no way diminishes

[4] Forecasts on the date of the next speech or a factual report on the speeches replacing, in numerous cases, field surveys or in-depth analyses.

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Kenya.

[6] Especially since this environment has the potential to be influenced by the very nature of the media coverage (relaying measures, explaining announcements, sharing experiences…).

[7] On information access among the Kenyan population, we can refer to Kenya's profile in the *Digital News Report* produced by the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford: http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/kenya-2020/ [archive].

its impact, but rather provides us with an accurate representation of its marginal position within the media landscape.[8]

We understand the term "alternative" both in the sense of the content produced (the choice of themes and perspectives that are rarely addressed by the traditional media) and the chosen format (the use of tools and resources eschewed by major press outlets) – two elements that can then be combined within a single media. To better define our subject, here are some examples:

– Alternative news platforms: *The Elephant*, *African Arguments*, *AfricaUncensored*, *The Conversation Africa*.
– Alternative formats: blogs (*Bikozulu*, *Magunga*, *Wandia Njoya*…), podcasts (*Legally Clueless*, *Otherwise?*, *Living Truthfully*…), literary magazines (*DRR*, *Lolwe*…), cartoons (Gado, Maddo…).

We can highlight a third criterion in describing these alternative structures: the fact that they often define themselves as such. This shifting corpus is structured around initiatives such as the African Digital Media Institute, the Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE), or more recently Baraza Media Lab. These initiatives act as professional platforms where content producers can find resources (information about the sector, grants, opportunities…), legal support, or communication channels.

In view of the scope of this article, I will focus on two very specific case studies: a news platform, *The Elephant*, and a blog, *Bikozulu*. Whilst they are very different in character and approach, these two media platforms both reflect unique ways of producing and covering information, in particular amid the context of a crisis.

Broadly speaking, my research is underpinned by the following considerations – which cannot all be addressed here. What form does creativity take in Kenya? How does it interact with news and information? What are the emerging media platforms in Kenya and what are their relationships with the so-called "traditional" media? What themes are they addressing during the Covid-19 crisis and what answers do they provide? For what kind of audience? How do these new methods of relaying information intersect with other social fields (the arts, activism…)?

To unlock elements of the answer, I have focused on specific cases of bloggers, podcasters and news platforms, using an approach that blends discourse analysis and the sociology of culture and the media. The health crisis has, of course, affected my research methodology, namely due to the fact that some of the standard research tools (libraries, physical interviews…) are inaccessible. I have concentrated on conducting extensive reading of the output of these two case studies, in conjunction with telephone interviews. Particular attention has been paid to the way in which the content has been shared on Facebook and Twitter. In parallel, I conducted a field survey in Nairobi with civil society actors on their views, practices, and habits regarding access to information and the arts.

[8] To take one example, as of July 2020, the media platform *The Elephant*'s Twitter account is being followed by 26,400 people, whereas *The Nation Media* has 2.1 million followers, which is nearly 100 times greater.

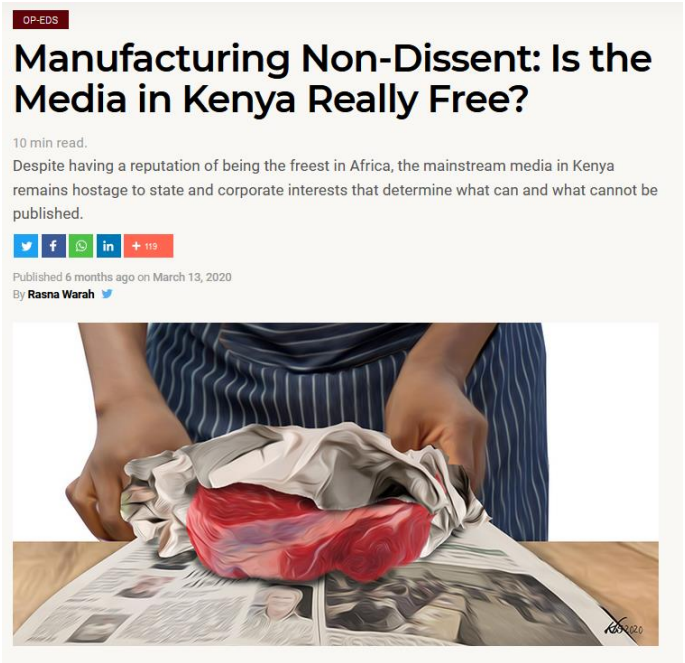
I. Alternative bews platforms: "*The Elephant*"

In terms of how it operates, *The Elephant* is similar to an online news outlet, with weekly articles on current affairs written by regular contributors or occasional freelancers. One characteristic makes it stand out, however, in comparison to the traditional Kenyan press: long-form content is preferred overall (the articles range from 2,000 to 4,000 words). Before analysing *The Elephant*'s coverage of the pandemic, we shall give a short overview of this media.

A. Overview

The Elephant was launched as a platform in 2016 by a collective of East African intellectuals motivated by the political desire to build a more inclusive and less unequal Kenyan society. This objective was developed in reaction to the hegemony of a few large Kenyan newspapers, most of them with close ties to the political elite.[9] Committed to its ethical charter, *The Elephant* defines itself as "a platform allowing citizens to reflect, to remember and to rethink their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future."

The Elephant's editorial stance is clearly expressed: the platform makes it their mission to be "at the centre of the national dialogue, speaking truth to power in a quest to re-imagine a state and a society that guarantee a life of inclusivity and dignity for all."


OP-EDS

Manufacturing Non-Dissent: Is the Media in Kenya Really Free?

10 min read.

Despite having a reputation of being the freest in Africa, the mainstream media in Kenya remains hostage to state and corporate interests that determine what can and what cannot be published.

Published 6 months ago on March 13, 2020
By **Rasna Warah**

An article from *The Elephant*, 13 mars 2020. See: https://www.theelephant.info/op-eds/2020/03/13/manufacturing-non-dissent-is-the-media-in-kenya-really-free/

[9] In an article on the intertwined nature of politics and economy in the Kenyan media, George Ogola talks about a "problematic relationship between the news media and a powerful parallel political infrastructure, without whose support it appeared most news media found it difficult to survive." (Ogola, 2011).

The Elephant is located at the intersection of academia and journalism. It takes its scientific rigour from the first—which Kenyan universities, owing to lack of funding, are not always able to offer—and its format from the second, with a clear editorial line. Added to that, it has a performative dimension. This is encapsulated in the platform's motto: "We speak Truth to Power." In other words, *The Elephant* seeks to inform its audience with documented ideas with the aim of influencing politics. This could also be interpreted as giving themselves the right to criticize those who are habitually not criticized.

We should note, incidentally, that this editorial stance is also present in the content of the articles themselves—some of which offer a meta-reflexive discourse on the role of the media and the arts in Kenya[10]—or even in the words of the contributors, who regularly denounce the traditional media on social media. Their main criticisms pertain to the disconnect between the content of the articles and the reality on the ground, the poor understanding and interpretation of scientific data, and the collusion between certain media outlets and the ruling elite.

It is worth detailing two of the platform's specificities: internet-users can comment on the articles, which allows for a continuation of the exchange in which the contributors themselves occasionally take part. The articles are also accompanied by illustrations—in addition to a "Cartoons" column created by satirists Gado Mwapembwa (who is also a member of the platform's management board) and Mdogo.

The audience is formed from a section of the Kenyan population comprising educated East Africans and expatriates looking for long-form articles and in-depth analysis. This readership represents around 26,400 followers on Twitter and 12,200 followers on Facebook[11].

The contributors come from the Kenyan intellectual classes, and several of them have also taken part in cultural projects such as the magazine *Kwani?*. The majority have degrees from the prestigious universities of the Kenyan capital or abroad (mostly from English-speaking countries)—and some of them still live overseas. They are of very different age, ranging from fresh graduates to seasoned intellectuals. For the most part, they know one another and interact over social media, thus forming an identifiable community. We should highlight that their editorial team is relatively open, as many first-time contributors have been able to post their articles online during the pandemic.

Lastly, *The Elephant* is reliant upon a donations system for its funding, with donors from around Kenya and abroad. When it first launched most of the start-up funding came from Kenyan investors. There is no advertising.

We now turn to *The Elephant*'s coverage of the Covid-19 crisis.

---

[10] Over the period studied, various articles—by Rasna Warah, Mwongela Kamencu, and Msanii Kimani wa Wanjiru in particular—emphasize the alignment between the media sector and the creation of a political agenda in Kenya. The most emblematic is Rasna Warah's article, which charts a contemporary history of the ties between politics and the traditional media, based on the writer's personal experience. See: Warah, Rasna. 2020. "Manufacturing Non-Dissent: Is the Media in Kenya Really Free?" *The Elephant*, March 13. https://www.theelephant.info/op-eds/2020/03/13/manufacturing-non-dissent-is-the-media-in-kenya-really-free/ [archive].

[11] In this respect, the interviews with civil society actors are revealing: the majority of the people interviewed had a limited level of education and were not familiar with the media platform, while those belonging to Kenya's cultural elite (readers and even occasional contributors) tended to exaggerate its reach and influence.

B. Between a think-tank and media outlet

Since March, *The Elephant* has created a section dedicated to information on the pandemic entitled "Coronavirus." It includes a real-time infographic showing the number of Covid-19 cases on the African continent, created using data compiled by the United Nations, the Worldmeter company, and local governments. The section on the coronavirus opens with a mini-manifesto: "At a time when good journalism is constrained by corporate interests, a deluge of fake news, state propaganda and sensationalism, *The Elephant* seeks clarity for its audience in this age of corona."

The publication's editorial stance is spelled out once again: Afrocentric vision, intellectual community, and the transmission of reliable and verified information.

Practically speaking, besides the use of software for data visualization, the platform tends to favour multimedia. This takes the form of webinars developed in partnership with the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA) and the Alliance française, podcasts made by local and foreign universities[12] on themes ranging from art and education to economic policies, and sharing spaces with other media platforms who approximate their editorial line, such as *Africa is A Country* or *Africa Uncensored*. This is designed to grow the area of visibility for all – and to unite the diasporic Kenyan community.

To date, over fifty articles have been listed under the "Coronavirus" section. They address themes as diverse as the economy, education, environment, East-African and international politics, religion, healthcare, and even the creative sector and the media.[13] They are often forward-looking reflections in which art and creativity intersect.

The artistic sector, for example, has itself been the subject of various dedicated contributions, in different registers. One of these, by the historian and musician Mwongela Kamencu,[14] evokes with scepticism the government measures aimed at artists, highlighting the threat they pose to creative freedom. The author also shares his first hand social experience as an artist. Another piece, by the art journalist Msanii Kimani wa Wanjiru,[15] documents the links between the health crisis and the emergence of the arts. He does so in a long format text (over 4,500 words) that integrates a historical perspective and features quotes taken from interviews and reports from statistical studies. In parallel, the artist and entrepreneur Muthoni Drummer Queen[16] has a podcast in which she shares her political, historical and social analysis of the pandemic.

In terms of styles, the articles range from position papers of the kind produced by think-tanks to documentary pieces in the style of American creative non-fiction. Regarding the

[12] See: https://www.theelephant.info/radio/

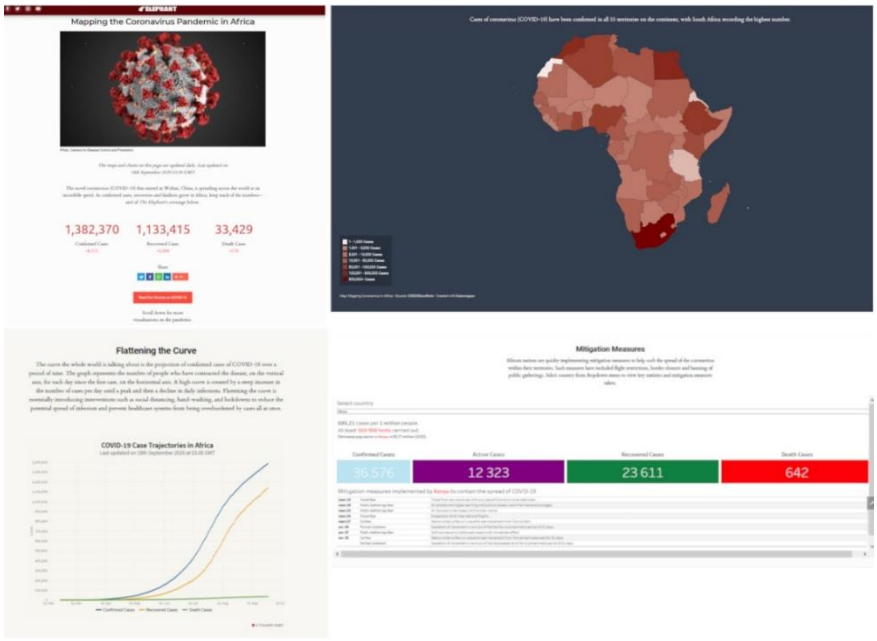
[13] Personal categorization.

[14] Kamencu, Mwongela. 2020. "Government Money, Artistic Freedom and Integrity in the Time of Coronavirus." *The Elephant*, June 24. https://www.theelephant.info/reflections/2020/06/24/government-money-artistic-freedom-and-integrity-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/ [archive].

[15] Wanjiru, Msanii Kimani wa. 2020. "The Role of the Artist in the Time of Corona." *The Elephant*, June 5. https://www.theelephant.info/culture/2020/06/05/the-role-of-the-artist-in-the-time-of-corona/ [archive].

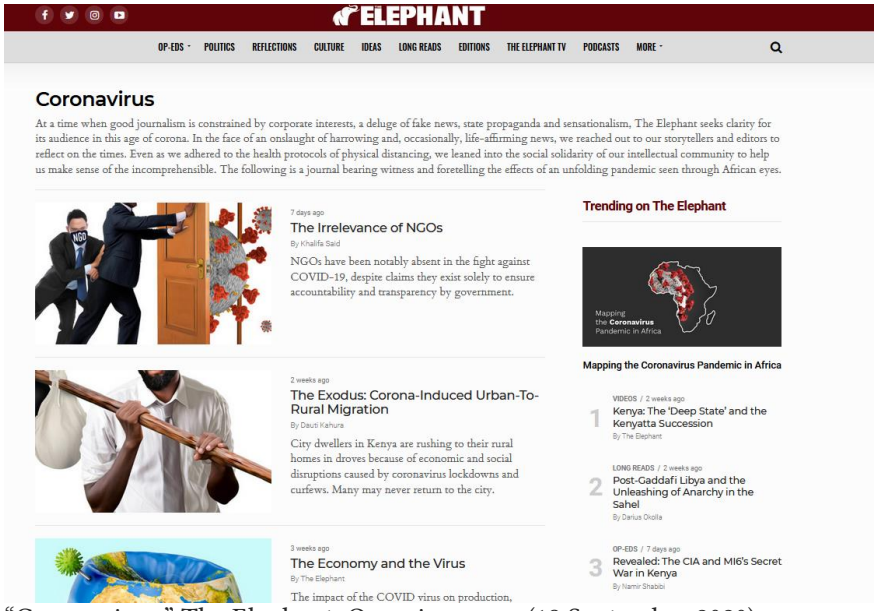
[16] "Muthoni Drummer Queen: Art in the Age of Corona." 2020. *The Elephant*, June 17. https://www.theelephant.info/radio/2020/06/17/muthoni-drummer-queen-art-in-the-age-of-corona/

position paper format, the article "The African Union Needs a Covid-19 Think-And-Do Tank"[17] by entrepreneur and academic Lydiah Kemunto Bosire is a particularly salient example. The author, a first-time contributor to the platform, recommends that the African Union set up a "think-and-do-tank" dedicated to responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. The style is pared-back, and the content is articulated with precision.



Elements form "Mapping the Coronavirus Pandemic in Africa," The Elephant: https://www.theelephant.info/mapping-the-coronavirus-pandemic-in-africa/ [archive] (screenshots: 18 September 2020).

[17] Bosire, Lydiah Kemunto. 2020. "The African Union Needs a COVID-19 Think-And-Do Tank." *The Elephant*, June 19. https://www.theelephant.info/op-eds/2020/06/19/the-african-union-needs-a-covid-19-think-and-do-tank/ [archive].



"Coronavirus," The Elephant. Overview page (18 September 2020). https://www.theelephant.info/editions/coronavirus/ [archive].

American creative non-fiction is exemplified in the text "A Tale of Two Lockdowns, 33 Years Apart"[18] written by Ugandan writer and journalist A.K. Kaiza. The author links the lockdown he experienced in Entebbe with memories of his childhood at a boarding school in Teso in 1987 during the war. His narrative is based on personal experience, which he extends into a meditation on how lockdown can lead to abandonment and solitude.

In sum, through its position in between a media outlet and a think tank, *The Elephant* offers original coverage of the crisis where the prospective, the recommendation and the relationship with history play a central role. The current subjects are observed together with proposals for action, in long and innovative formats (podcasts, infographics…), which clearly break with the classical journalism model in Kenya. Two points may be questioned, nonetheless: who is this anti-establishment tone – a trademark of the platform—aimed at? And how can the impact of recommendations on public policies be measured? For all that, *The Elephant* exhibits a boldness within a fossilized media landscape and contributes to structuring the media sector, the academic world, and to stimulating the imagination and creativity.

From this panoramic and multidisciplinary vision of Kenyan society, we shift to an internal vision through focusing on slices of life captured in narratives. The second subject of this paper, the Bikozulu blog, has in effect been chosen because it is radically different in nature. It offers a complementary view of Kenya society. Whereas *The Elephant* deals with information through a collective, scientific and documented effort, the Bikozulu blog focuses on individual stories lived by many sections of Kenyan society—without resembling news blogs. For some of its readers, it nonetheless serves as a primary news source.

[18] Kaiza, A.K. 2020. "A Tale of Two Lockdowns, 33 Years Apart." *The Elephant*, May 30. https://www.theelephant.info/reflections/2020/05/30/a-tale-of-two-lockdowns-33-years-apart/ [archive].

II. A creative writing blog: *Bikozulu*

To begin with, we should remind ourselves that the Kenyan blogosphere is particularly dense.[19] The *Bloggers Association of Kenya* (BAKE), which brings together bloggers and content creators around the country, is structured by category (technology, photography, creative writing, fashion…) and every year it stages an online vote with prizes, the "Bake Awards,"[20] for the most popular. The bloggers remain on the radar of politicians, who distrust what they sometimes consider to be initiatives with activist overtones.[21]

We should note that blogs are run by individuals who speak out under their own name about their chosen subjects, their funding model and their promotion – often over social media – which guarantees them longevity (or not).

A. Recording daily lives

Let's start with some background on the *Bikozulu* blog and its author Jackson Biko. Born in 2009, the *Bikozulu* blog is one of the oldest in Kenya. At the time of its creation, its author worked for a men's magazine. Unable to find another outlet to share his texts, Biko gave himself the opportunity to be free with his content and to post when he wanted by creating a blog.

The subtitle of the blog, "Everything is a story", indicates from the outset the positioning of the blogger as storyteller. The *Bikozulu* blog consists in effect of life stories, ranging in length from 2,500 to 3,000 words on average. In his posts, the blogger recounts miscellaneous events, an anecdote or an experience he has had which resonates with the life of an individual he has met. Posts alternate between those without a business purpose and those featuring brands in the text. The frequency of one post per week is strictly adhered to.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, out of the group of seventeen posts studied, the editorial line remains stable: true stories immerse the reader in the daily life of urban Kenya or illuminate sometimes little-known social realities in rural areas.

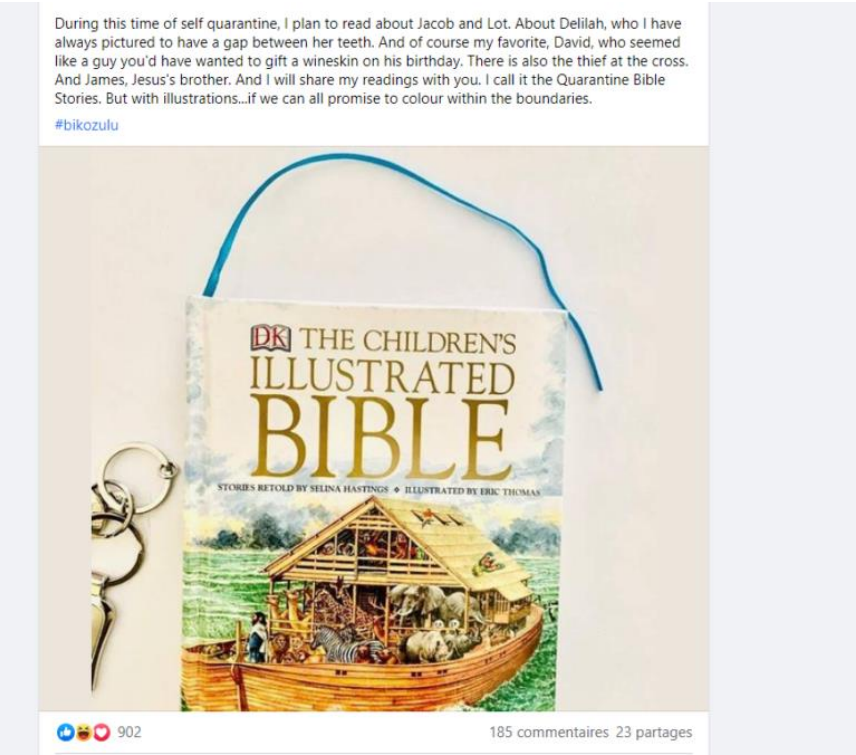
[19] It is worth noting that numerous contributors to *The Elephant*, such as Wandia Njoya and Oyunga Pala, are also bloggers.
[20] See: https://www.bakeawards.co.ke/ [archive].
[21] Robert Alai was arrested on 20 March 2020 for sharing information on his Twitter account (1.4 million followers as of July 2020) about Covid-19 described by the Kenyan government as false.



A post entitled "A Girl. A Picture. A Story"[22] dating from 29 May 2020 is an account, supported by photographs, of the life of a little girl in Turkana, unable to attend school during the pandemic. Another entitled "Look At Us"[23] dating from 14 April 2020 takes as its starting point the pregnancy of the daughter of a single mother to expose the impact of the virus on the life of a domestic worker. By drawing attention to this reality, the blogger calls on the reader's generosity through promoting a point system put in place by a telephone operator. A third, called "Barua,"[24] opens with political-satirical reflections on a speech by President Kenyatta to propose a meditation on the writer's profession, on creativity, and on the importance of having a mentor. This last point aims to shine a light on the work of the young blogger Eddy Ashioya, who contributed a post to the Biko blog previously[25].

In sum, the themes of scenes from daily life described in the different posts vary (social hardship, parenthood, mental health…) but extensive reflection on the creative sector and on writing—which Biko also teaches—is present throughout. It is worth noting that, in addition to blog posts, follow-up stories are invited on Facebook and Instagram. There is, for example, for the period that interests us a series entitled *Quarantine Bible Stories* featuring stories of scenes from an illustrated Bible. This use of social media forms part of the trajectory of the blog, whose structure and funding model have evolved over time.

[22] "A Girl. A Picture. A Story." 2020. *Bikozulu*, May 26. https://bikozulu.co.ke/a-girl-a-picture-a-story/ [archive].
[23] ""Look At Us"." 2020. *Bikozulu*, April 14. https://bikozulu.co.ke/look-at-us/ [archive].
[24] "Barua." 2020. *Bikozulu*, June 9. https://bikozulu.co.ke/barua/ [archive].
[25] See: "From Home." 2020. https://bikozulu.co.ke/from-home/ [archive].



Post on the Bikozulu Facebook page, 25 March 2020.
https://www.facebook.com/Bikozulu/posts/2664652510300065 [archive]

B. One blog, one trajectory

In 2009, embedded advertising and social media existed in a very limited form. Biko's writings, which he was already sharing over Facebook, very quickly exerted a strong pull. For the next four years, however, the blog failed to generate any revenue. Then there were two stages: in 2013, thanks to the community he was able to attract, Biko was approached by an initial brand. More than just income, they offered him products and perks (a fully sponsored tour of South Africa in exchange for a piece by the blogger promoting the brand). In 2015 the *pay-for-content* system became popular and the brands approached Biko asking for product placement. The funding model now established, the blogger remains in charge of what brands he chooses to sponsor through his posts.

As a number of the bloggers I interviewed confirmed to me, the idea of freedom is located at the heart of the approach, which is seen first and foremost as creative.

In terms of audience, nowadays *Bikozulu* assembles a community of close to 140,000 subscribers on Facebook and 174,000 followers on Twitter—a platform where he is particularly active. Similarly to *The Elephant*, there is little data available on the audience, but we can lean towards a middle-class readership, fairly urban: the posts, written in English, are often set against the backdrop of the city of Nairobi and they namecheck areas and landmarks in the capital. The community is quick to participate in a very rich "comments" section. This also translates into concrete actions, like crowdfunding campaigns for individuals or organizations initiated in the blog posts.

There is a close relationship between blogger and audience—despite what the author says, claiming in an interview[26] that he does not worry about the comments—and the themes of the stories are sometimes suggested by interested parties. The sense of community comes from the fact that the blogger puts himself in his writings. Moreover, the posts are shared on social media where they find a second life—and sometimes a third over WhatsApp exchanges.

Ultimately, an alternative kind of news writing is taking shape: information is embedded in long-form stories where emotion is at the heart of the narrative, leaving the reader to analyse the reported events. For the blogger, these stories are an opportunity to promote a lifestyle associated with certain brands, to showcase himself and to approach the writing sector in a self-reflexive way. The community of readers of the blog is also becoming a source of writing, which finds a voice on social media. For *Bikozulu*, the work is also documentary in nature: recording urban stories, which describe a world in the process of being written. In the posts there is a blend of social meditation, marketing, literary creativity, and the desire to document.

***

In conclusion, through these two forms of alternative media we can gauge the awareness of information through long-form articles in two different yet complementary ways: on the one hand, *The Elephant*, a collective project, presents a critical and informed view of Kenyan society, which is even more necessary during the pandemic; and on the other hand the *Bikozulu* blog is a window onto the private lives of Kenyan workers affected by the crisis, without directly adhering to current affairs.

Of course, the objectives of these two media platforms differ. In the first case it is about providing documented information and recommendations for a renewed model of governance, while in the second the purpose is rather to share stories at a human scale, and to incorporate brand promotion. These are two different approaches to writing, at the frontiers of journalism, science, and fiction. By adapting the terminology of Michel de Certeau initially applied to mapping geographical space, we can liken *The Elephant's* approach to that of the "voyeur" who looks down from a height on Kenyan society as a whole, and that of *Bikozulu* as a "walker," a true practitioner of the space, who explores a specific section of this same society from the inside.

Ultimately, creativity is at the heart of these two initiatives, whether it resides in the chosen formats or in the content produced, and in return it informs an audience, which remains difficult for the researcher to identify with precision.[27] Contemporary works of digital ethnography—such as the methodical exploration conducted by Daniel Miller, the development of the notion of *geomedia* by Lane DeNicola, or even the *imagined audience* advanced by Eszter Hargittai—nonetheless provide us with interesting tools to determine the nature of this online audience potentially reconfigured by the public health crisis.

[26] Phone interview with the blogger, 20 May 2020.

[27] On the difficulties of qualitative study (identifying audience and communities) in the media and social networks, we can refer to *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*, particularly parts V, VI and VII.

Selected Bibliography

BAKE (Bloggers Association of Kenya). *State of the Internet in Kenya 2017*. https://www.ifree.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/State-of-the-Internet-in-Kenya-report-2017.pdf [archive].

de Certeau, Michel. 1990 (1980). *L'Invention du quotidien*. Paris: Gallimard.

Fielding, Nigel G., Raymond M. Lee and Grant Blank (ed.). 2017. *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods* (2nd edition). London: SAGE Publications.

Husinger, Jeremy, Matthew M. Allen and Lisbeth Klastrup (ed.). 2010. *International Handbook of Internet Research*. Holland: Springer.

Ligaga, Dina. 2012. '"Virtual Expressions": Alternative Online Spaces and the Staging of Kenyan Popular Cultures'. *Research in African Literatures* 43, no. 4: 1–16. http://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.43.4.1.

Nanjala, Nyabola. 2018. *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics. How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya*. London: Zed.

Ogola, George. 2017. *Popular Media in Kenyan History. Fiction and Newspapers as Political Actors*. New York (NY): Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49097-7.

Ogola, George. 2011. "The Political Economy of the Media in Kenya: From Kenyatta's Nation-Building Press to Kibaki's Local-Language FM Radio". *Africa Today* 57, no. 3: 77–95. http://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.57.3.77.

Pole, Antoinette. 2009. *Blogging the Political: Politics and Participation in a Networked Society*. London: Routledge.

Reuters Institute. 2020. *Digital News Report 2020*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf [archive].