MEDIA PRACTICE IN EAST AFRICA

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Introduction

The modern media in East Africa, as it is emerging today was a creation of European missionaries, immigrants and the colonial administration. These were responsible for the introduction of the printing press, radio and later television. They used this media primarily for the dissemination of news and information among the European residents and settlers. It has been suggested that the media at this time was used as a device to maintain the status quo (Ochilo, 1993). The media had little to offer the natives during the colonial period, it remained in character and function, European oriented and reflected basically the dominant influence of the west.

Unlike in the west, the media in Africa during the colonial period was not a major instrument of political and social change; it lacked the profound social foundation and distinction relevant to the local people.

Given the above historical introduction of the media and its orientation during the colonial and post colonial period, the topic Media Practice in East Africa is relevant and critical. It presents certain challenges for the media as it strives towards excellence in communication. The topic is both timely and critical for the following reasons:

(i) East Africa has in the past 10 years gone through some significant political change, ranging from the monolithic one party state, military dictatorship to multi-party politics;

(ii) The role of the media in this era has been confusing and the growth and diversity seriously compromised through state political control, party control, elite and commercial interests control of the various channels of communication such that there has been interference, tending to reduce the effective functional role of the media as a watchdog on behalf of the majority who do not belong to the ruling elite(Muhoro, 2003, Ochilo, 1993);

(iii) The media must, during this time of change take its rightful place in various forms of the development process. It must be seen to be serving the ends of development effectively (Muhoro, 2003).

This chapter discusses media practice in the East Africa region, it will analyse the factors that limit the functional role of the media and thus forms a barrier to excellence in media practice. The chapter is divided into 5 parts (i) General background to the paper; (ii) Overview of the media in East Africa: A historical perspective; (iii) Media practice: A discussion of the factors which inhibit the functional

role of the media; (iv) Suggested solutions towards eliminating the factors that hinder the media from meeting its functional role; and (v) Conclusion.

Overview of media institutions in East Africa
Preamble

The East African countries of Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya which were once a media desert are today a landscape flourishing with newspapers, radio, television stations, computers and mobile phones. Faringer (1999:2) argues that the African press emerged under colonialism; media practice in East Africa therefore has a long history of similar but not necessarily identical characteristics. All the countries were colonized almost at the same time, shared similar experiences of colonialism, achieved independence almost at the same time, looked towards integration as seen through the East African Community (EAC) and grappled with democratization issues. Thus, media practice in East Africa cannot be understood in the absence of its history, the association being that journalism is a discipline that records events for public consumption on a daily basis, and therefore an agent of history.

Although the ideal discussion on media practice in East Africa would entail a much more obvious but longer approach than has been used to discuss media practice in this paper, the historical perspective will take account of the four major periods in East Africa's history including the colonial era, pre-independence era, post independence era and the present. This chapter has been structured with a comprehensive framework that takes into account the need to provide an overview of media institutions and media practice over the period, the belief is that such an approach will provide deeper understanding of media practice and the need to give new policy direction to the media practice in East Africa. The chapter is clear that there has been a disconnect between policy and practice which has led to the disempowerment of the East Africa people. Wete (1995)