

School of Journalism and Mass Communication's Annual Media Summit sets the foundation for increased research and scholarship

By Dr. George Nyabuga



Cabinet Secretary for Information, Communication and Technology, Dr. Fred Matiangi with the Director, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Dr. Wambui Kiai (right) during the Annual Media Summit.

Research and scholarship have always played a critical role in the way we understand and internalise issues.

This is premised on the notion that it is research that contributes to the production of new knowledge, it is research that critically engages with and interrogates the issues of the day, and it is through research that we can strengthen education and training as well as institutions of higher learning.

In fact, research is the foundation upon which serious and established academic institutions are built. It is the quality and amount of research that determines the success of any institution. This of course alongside the quality of education offered.

The place of research is thus fortified by the fact that many organisations rely on valid and reliable findings to assess their performances, and make decisions.

Yet, despite the importance of research, there have been few serious media studies in Kenya, and purely academic or scholarly conferences where research findings

can be shared, debated, approved, disapproved, adopted or discarded. Of course in recent years, we have started to see a rise in media scholarly activity, and increased engagement between actors in media and journalism, academia, civil society, government and other sectors. There has begun to sprout platforms and channels for engagement, for production and sharing of information and knowledge.

The emergence of the East Africa Communication Association (EACA) and set up of its annual conference has been an important step in attempts to promote research and scholarship. The latest in initiatives to promote media, journalism and communication scholarship is the University of Nairobi Annual Media Summit whose inaugural meeting was held 13-15 November 2013.

The Summit examined issues relating to media ownership, training, the coverage of elections, diversity, and conflict, and assessed media performance before, during and after the March 4, 2013 general election. Within that ambit, the meeting also looked at the relationship between news media and journalism on one hand and politics, governance and democracy on the other. It interrogated the social, cultural, political and economic embeddedness of journalistic and media practices in the context of rapidly changing, albeit fluid, political

and democratic developments. It also examined issues, actors and agents informing and affecting the democratic and political process in Kenya.

To help make sense of these issues were some of the best media scholars from and outside Kenya. Prof Kwame Karikari from the Media Foundation for West Africa tackled the issue of media and diversity. Prof Goretti Nassanga from Makerere University presented a paper on training and how it impacts media coverage of elections. Issues of media and conflict were tackled by Prof Winnie Mitullah of the University of Nairobi. Dr Brice Rambaud of Internews talked about the media's coverage of elections while Dr Othieno Nyanjom presented on media ownership. At hand to contribute to the discussion of media and elections and particularly how the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission handled the poll was the vice chair Mrs Lilian Bokeeye Mahiri-Zaja. Other presentations and discussions were enriched by views, in panel discussions, plenary discussions and by participants from different backgrounds and countries. Delegates came from Burundi, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda and of course Kenya.

The conference was officially opened by the Cabinet Secretary for Information, Communication and Technology Dr Fred Matiang'i who challenged universities and other institutions of higher learning to engage more in research. "One of the deliverables of such a conference is the production of new research and knowledge on journalism and the media. I wish to exhort the participants to address the issues of uptake of the generated research and apply the knowledge gathered and produced to inform and enhance debate, the media roles, responsibilities and good practice," he said.

On his part, University of Nairobi's Vice-Chancellor Prof George Magoha

commended the School of Journalism and Mass Communication for organising the conference which he reckoned would promote research and scholarship. In a speech read on his behalf by the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Prof. Henry Mutoro, the Vice-Chancellor also applauded the School for its continued commitment to quality journalism and communication education and training.

The conference themes and topics were chosen particularly not because the media is in a state of flux but also because it is facing numerous challenges. In a fluid political environment, the media in Kenya seems constantly on watch particularly as it seeks to guard against serious state encroachment on liberties key to its operations and performance. Yet the media itself has subjected to fierce criticism for its canoodling with actors whose main (and rather deceitful) agenda is information and knowledge manipulation and management.

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The issues above should of course interest the media, and the people that manage it. Such issues should be the basis for deeper research to help understand the genesis of and basis for the problems that beset the media and journalism at the moment. Granted, arguments abound that the media is often capricious and belligerent particularly when events are going against it.

The Annual Media Summit, organised by the School of Journalism and Communication, was premised on the fact that research activity is key to the strengthening of communication, journalism and media education and knowledge production. Accordingly, it is not only interested in the production of new research and knowledge on journalism and media but also the promotion of debates and general knowledge and understanding of journalistic and media roles, responsibilities, powers and practices, and the development and consolidation of effective relationships between scholars and institutions of journalism and media as well as practitioners and industry.

The Annual Media Summit addresses a wide range of issues relating to journalism and the media, both traditional and new. No topic will be out of bounds. In other words, normative as well as controversial issues relating to media and journalism will be addressed as a way of promoting high order research into traditional as well as emerging issues. The themes of the meeting will vary from year to year but will specifically relate to media and journalism. For example, themes will range from the obvious like the media and the political process to the controversial representation of sexuality for instance homosexuality. There will be opportunities for inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary approaches meant to expand media and journalism discourses into other related academic domains.