

Daniel Kalinaki Tribute

Reflections on three decades in the newsroom

As he retires from the mainstream media newsroom, NMG-Uganda's General Manager, Editorial, **Daniel K. Kalinaki**, reflects on three decades at the coal face of journalism practice.

I don't remember the subject of my first newspaper headline, but I can never forget how it made me feel. I had run and edited handwritten pamphlets since I was eight or nine in primary school, but this was the real deal, an article in a printed newspaper.

The article itself still had to be handwritten (this was before computers, but more on that later) and then handed to the receptionist at the newspaper front desk, in my case, at the tri-weekly *The Crusader* office on Kampala Road.

Then came the wait. There were no emails, and mobile phones were so expensive that the operators charged for airtime in dollars and were a status symbol owned by only a few wealthy people. (They made sure to show them off, often by strutting them in holders on their belts; I never saw women with mobile phones back then).

The only way to find out if you had been published was to read the newspaper. To save money on other boring writers, you politely asked a newspaper vendor on the street to thumb through a copy. If you hadn't made it, you thanked them politely, then wandered off into the distance, fighting back tears.

But there it was, a day or two later. In a sea of black ink, there was the unmistakable set of letters arranged to spell out my name. My hand dived into my pocket, fished out a few notes and handed them over in exchange for the newspaper, the first I had ever bought! I retreated to a corner of the street and ravenously ate up the article, a strange sensation of hearing myself speak in a new voice.

The next step was to show off my newfound status as a published author and public intellectual. There was no Internet on which to blog or brag, no social media platform to post or share.

But there was a perfect analogue spot; the Nile Grill restaurant outside Uganda House on Kampala Road, where cadres from the Uganda Peoples' Congress (UPC) spent their days waiting, I suppose, for Apollo Milton Obote to somehow make a surprising return.

I ordered a soda, casually flipped the newspaper open to the page with my article, and waited for someone to ask to read the paper. But no one did. These UPC fellows had either already had their daily dose of media or had their own supply arrangements. I started judging them for completely ignoring me. I noticed their threadbare shirt collars and shoes so scruffy; no wonder they had not been able to run into exile.

Eventually, I went home and

shared the good news with the people who really mattered. I, of course, insisted that they wash their hands before touching the paper. I realised, there and then, that this is what I wanted to do for a living. The bug had bitten, and I was infected, incurably.

If getting in was hard, staying in the game was even harder. You were only as good as your last byline, and you had to keep finding stories that were interesting enough to publish and which no one else had. A few privileged journalists were handed the easy scoops that came off the fax machine, or when the Internet started appearing, from foreign reports about Uganda.

Mostly, however, one had to find and cultivate sources, or go out to look for stories, often literally. When I encountered the creaking and groaning lifts at, of all places, Uganda House in later years, it led to a story about how health and safety protocols were ignored in public buildings. That story is true today as it was three decades ago.

Competition was stiff inside the newsrooms. When I tried to venture into sports writing, I ran into unforeseen turf wars. All the big events had big names attached to them, understandably. But every small one that I expressed interest in, whether darts, chess, or hockey, also, suddenly, had someone going to cover it.

Covering sports

One day, there was a big football game at Nambooke stadium, and it was assigned to a senior staff writer. But I bought myself a ticket and went, anyway. The sports journalists always sat together, bantered, and dragged their feet back to the newsroom to file, sure that the press would wait for their big stories.

When the match ended, I dashed back to the newsroom, typed out the story (yes, computers had come, colleagues), and handed the file name to Mark Ssali, the then-sports editor. I stepped away from his desk but remained in earshot and watched as he opened the document on his computer and skimmed through the article. Then he reached for the telephone (yes, even phones had now come, colleagues), called the assigned staff writer, and told him not to bother coming back to write the match report.

My first sports byline the next day was almost as pleasurable as the first-ever. There was a tinge of guilt about how I had obtained it, but success sometimes goes to the swift-footed.

The stiff competition inside the newsrooms was softened somewhat by the camaraderie. There was rank, but the layers of bureaucracy were flattened by youthful swagger and talent. An endearing image is of Andrew Mwenda sitting with his feet on the office desk of Wafu-la-Wafu Ogunu, the editor-in-chief, while he narrated some exclusive story. You had to have big balls – and even bigger stories – to get away with such impudence.

Journalism in the 'good old days'

Rosy introspection is the tendency to look at the past with rose-coloured shades and view it more favourably than it really was. This is a flaw

reminding about journalism in the 'good old days' must contend with. For instance, look closely at old newspapers, and you will see terrible design, sloppy editing, and stories told without background or context. In a 2004 piece written from the lofty Ivory Tower of graduate school, I argued, for instance, that our journalism was so shallow, we couldn't bury a dead dog in it. History will judge if it got any better.

Yet journalism exists in specific contexts, and some of what we witnessed and lived through felt momentous. Take the coverage of the Constituent Assembly the 1996 election (the first in 15 years and the first to elect a president directly), or the Sixth Parliament, to whom the task first fell to superintend the new constitutional order.

Or consider the journalists who covered the Rwanda war in 1990 and the genocide that followed in 1994, those who walked into the jungles of DR Congo, or those who bore witness to the brutality of the National Resistance Army (NRA) counterinsurgency in northern Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebellion that followed.

Compared to today's fascination with which MP cut down power lines they had helped install or which developer has grabbed yet another public space, it feels like we operated at the tail end of history, to paraphrase and bastardise Francis Fukuyama. This does not make contemporary journalism any easier or any less important, but it does feel a bit lighter sometimes, even spurious.

What hasn't changed is the incredible toll journalism takes on its practitioners, particularly in poor, pre-industrial, and autocratic countries. Many journalists join the newsroom as young, passionate idealists. We don't just exist in the world; we seek to change it, one story at a time.

And while words are powerful, the world is stubborn in its ways, and the laws of physics are immutable. Some leave when this reality hits. Others, when aggression and repression draw unbearably close. For the majority, it is down to finance and fatigue.

These political-economic tensions have defined contemporary mainstream media in Uganda. The founders of *The Monitor* left the *Weekly Topic* so that they could write and speak more freely but there were also underlying economic considerations. Those were clearer and more explicit in the case of the journalists who then left *The Monitor* to found *The Crusader*, the *Red Pepper*, the *Weekly Observer*, et cetera.

Less dramatic but no less important were the budding and talented journalists whose passion was dulled by penury and departed for the boring tedium of 'civilian' careers and financial growth.

Others stuck to the course but were eventually worn down by the long hours. Many good female journalists never returned when they went to start families or left soon after, finding the long hours incompatible with these new responsibilities.

Fatigue claimed its fair share. In their farewell notes, James Tumusiime and Richard Kavuma, both former colleagues here, who then left and later edited *The Observer*, spoke with the weariness of old men that belied their young ages.

"Our political and economic

ities, coupled with the pressures of the craft itself, make it difficult for top journalists to stay on, well into their 50s and 60s, as in other countries." Tumusiime said in 2018. Journalists have dreams and ambitions, too, and when these are not being realised and yet the work is stressful and thankless, the tendency to opt out is understandable.

Covid-19 mass exodus

The coronavirus pandemic triggered deep introspection and a mass exodus from many careers in journalism included. My colleagues Margaret Vuhiri, Carol Bejanga, Josephine Karungi, Williams Kato, and Linda Kibombo, among others, all left within two years of the end of the pandemic. Others here and elsewhere continue this quiet retreat – one that I now must sadly join – in search of calmer seas and fresh challenges.

That there is a whiff of sadness to it is to be expected. Like fine wine, journalists get better with age as they temper their radicalism, clarify their perspectives, and deepen their understanding of how the world works. The departure of the old hands here and elsewhere leaves a hole at the very moment journalism needs to reclaim its relevance in a world where everyone is a content creator and where some of the best subject-matter experts and storytellers are not even journalists.

This challenge, of how to remain relevant, is one that younger journalists must face and find new ways to overcome. In a world of dazzling new technology every other day, some of the answers are surprisingly old-school and have always been at the heart of journalism.

In September 2009, a rumour rapidly spread that the Kabaka of Buganda, Ronald Muwenda Mutebi, had been arrested. There was a standoff between the kingdom and the Central Government, so such an arrest was plausible but would be a severe escalation.

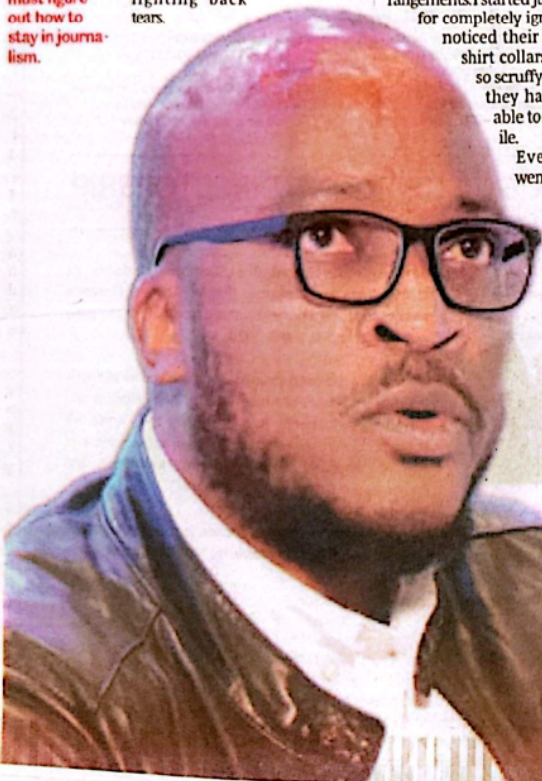
We had to verify, but how? We couldn't call the front desk at Bulange, the seat of the kingdom at Mengo, for a comment. It was after hours and the kingdom's civil servants had taken their medications and gone to bed.

We had to put boots on the ground. So, Don Wanyama, then a sub-editor on the paper, who lived in Kireka and had first-hand knowledge of the area, was sent with a photographer to the Kabaka's palace in Kireka to investigate.

As they approached the palace gates, armed soldiers descended on the car and roughed up the journalists. Eventually, calls were made, and the journalists were sent away, but we knew that the Kabaka was still in his palace and free. The story died, but the journalists lived.

This ability to verify, including the willingness to take one for the audience, remains at the heart of journalism. And in a world where a routine maintenance flight of the presidential jet can serve as a prop or 'proof' of a fake story about the health status of a prominent personality, journalism that can be trusted and relied upon remains premium.

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Cardinal goal. The details of how it can be sustained profitably will have to be worked out, but if media houses face an existential threat to remain in business, the journalists we are leaving behind in the newsrooms must figure out how to stay in journalism.