What next after ad ban knocks local TV broadcasters sideways

UCC stated that restricting split-screen advertising during news and current affairs is intended to protect viewers from distraction and to maintain a "clear-cut separation of advertising from editorial content."

BY DEOGRATIUS WAMALA

Uganda's television industry is confronting a hard regulatory reset after the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) ruled that split-screen advertising, explicitly including the popular "squeeze back" format, must not be used during news and current affairs programmes.

In practical terms, the directive means broadcasters can no longer run commercial visuals alongside live or recorded news content, forcing stations to fully separate editorial programming from advertising.

What is the "squeeze back" format?

The "squeeze back" format, where news footage is reduced in size to accommodate adverts on part of the screen, had grown increasingly common in Uganda as television stations sought to maximise shrinking advertising revenues without interrupting continuous broadcasts.

Over time, the practice blurred the line between journalism and commercial messaging, raising concerns among regulators about audience distraction, compromised editorial integrity, and the potential erosion of public trust in news content; issues that ultimately prompted UCC's intervention.

The decision, delivered in Arbitral Complaint No. 4 of 2025 between Adlegal International Limited and NBS Television Limited on January 27 by Nyombi Thembo, the UCC executive director, goes well beyond a single broadcaster. It redraws the commercial boundaries of prime time and clarifies, in uncompromising terms, how far stations may go in monetising editorial attention.

Explain the uniqueness of Adlegal's approach to the issues it illuminated

At its core, the dispute was never simply about screen layouts or graphic techniques. Adlegal framed the complaint as a matter of public interest, arguing that placing advertising alongside current affairs content "shifts the focus of the broadcaster from informing the public to generating revenue," thereby weakening editorial integrity in favour of commercial gain.

The programmes cited—*Morning* ... and *NBS Ea-*



The NBS offices in Naguru, Kampala. NBS was identified as the most consistent and aggressive user of split-screen advertising within current affairs programming. PHOTO/COURTESY OF NBS WEBSITE

most consistent and aggressive user of split-screen advertising within current affairs programming and, crucially, as a market leader whose practices carried wider industry influence.

Other broadcasters, including NTV, were assessed but found to engage in the practice far less frequently or to rely mainly on in-house promotions rather than paid commercial overlays.

NBS's regular monetisation of high-viewership current affairs content made it the most suitable vehicle for setting a regulatory precedent.

How did the accused plead and why was their plea rejected?

In its defence, NBS argued that the advertising in question was not split-screen but "squeeze backs," defined as brief sponsor graphics displayed for about 10 seconds when the main picture is reduced in size.

According to the broadcaster, squeeze backs are less intrusive, do not distract viewers in the same way as split screens, and do not pose the risk of biased reporting that the advertising standards were intended to prevent.

NBS also raised a broader industry concern, noting that as audiences increasingly avoid traditional commercial breaks, broadcasters must develop "ingenious advertising techniques" that give sponsors visibility without undermining programmes.

The Commission rejected this distinc-

WHAT TOOLS DO LOCAL BROADCASTERS HAVE IN THEIR TOOLKIT TO EASE THE PAIN?

In the short term, broadcasters will need to adjust production workflows, sales strategies, and sponsor expectations to maintain a strict separation between editorial and advertising content in restricted programmes.

In the longer term, the decision is likely to reignite debate over whether the Advertising Standards should be reviewed to reflect changing commercial realities.

For now, however, the regulator's message is that prime time may be a cash cow, but when it comes to news and current affairs, commercial innovation stops where the screen begins to split.

screen advertising; what matters is the viewer's experience.

Where editorial and commercial content appear on screen at the same time, the practice falls squarely within the prohibition.

This interpretation is significant because it closes a loophole that many screen advertising during news and current affairs is intended to protect viewers from distraction and to maintain a "clear-cut separation of advertising from editorial content."

This position is echoed by Aziz Kitaka, Adlegal's founder and a consumer attorney, who argues that "as a matter of law, current affairs programmes provide sensitive information nationals so badly want and they benefit them a lot." He maintains that broadcasters should not exploit this content commercially because doing so divides viewers' attention and may cause them to miss critical information.

In this framing, the harm lies not only in commercial intrusion but in the erosion of understanding and civic value.

Uganda's regulatory stance is not unusual by global standards. The country's split-screen rules draw heavily from international best practice, reflecting principles found in jurisdictions such as the UK, the US, Kenya, and parts of Europe.

Across these systems, the underlying logic is consistent that news and current affairs occupy a protected regulatory space because of their role in informing citizens and shaping public discourse. While split-screen advertising may be tolerated in entertainment, sports, religious, or music programming, where interruptions do not directly undermine public understanding, the drafters of Uganda's law delib-

mitting regulatory non-compliance.

As the Commission stated, it is bound to apply the law "as it is today, and not how it ought to be," invoking the maxim Dura lex sed lex; the law is harsh, but it is still the law.

What implications are local broadcasters looking at?

The commercial implications are far-reaching. News and current affairs programmes represent some of the most valuable real estate on Ugandan television because they deliver consistent audiences, high trust, and strong engagement.

Split-screen and squeeze-back formats allowed broadcasters to monetise moments of near-guaranteed attention, shielding advertisers from audience drop-off during breaks.

By banning these formats in precisely those programmes, UCC has removed a premium revenue tool and pushed stations back toward more traditional, and often less efficient, advertising structures. This is likely to place pressure on advertising rates, sponsorship packages, and broadcaster–agency negotiations.

Inventory that once delivered high certainty of exposure may now need to be replaced with conventional spots or alternative integrations at lower perceived value.

Over time, this could compress margins and accelerate the search for revenue in permitted areas such as sports programming, sponsorships that do not share screen space, or digital platforms outside linear broadcasting.

The decision also carries reputational and editorial consequences. By linking split-screen advertising breaches to the Minimum Broadcasting Standards under the Uganda Communications Act, UCC elevated the issue from a technical advertising concern to a core compliance obligation.

Broadcasters are reminded that all content must be "in compliance with the existing law," reinforcing the need to protect editorial spaces; especially news and current affairs, from commercial encroachment.

Although the Commission chose not to sanction NBS, citing its cooperative conduct and its "mistaken but ostensibly a genuine belief" that squeeze backs were permitted, this leniency should not be read as tolerance.

The directive is that NBS must "IMMEDIATELY cease and stop the use of split-screen advertising, including the use of squeeze backs," during news and current affairs programmes, with the warning that failure to comply may attract sanctions. After such a clear ruling, future violations will be far harder

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