

Bimeeza, weekend editions, jazz, and the new fight over narratives

The last stand-alone *Sunday Monitor* was published on March 1. On the same day, the President had a “jazz with jjaja” engagement with social media bloggers, influencers, and content creators. In a way, the two events reflect the direction of travel in setting and shaping the narrative of public discourse.

Let's start with the iconic green mast of the *Sunday Monitor*. If you were a youngish writer in Kampala in the late 1990s, there were two holy grail publications: *The EastAfrican* weekly or either one of *Sunday Monitor* or *Sunday Vision*.

Monitor had been first out of the blocks and with its full-colour print and a lean-back reading experience under the editorship of first Richard Tebere, and then the avant-garde Sim Kyazze. The weekend papers were where big stories broke or were broken.

They were also unique in that they all had early editions, which made them both afternoon and morning papers. The Saturday papers were available on Friday afternoon, and the Sundays around lunch on Saturday. This made them almost futuristic in the sense that you could read tomorrow's news today and, when sufficiently major developments occurred, the later edition could capture it. One often had to buy two editions of each paper.

It wasn't immediately clear then, but this attribute made the weekend papers the agenda setters because of what they fed into; the outdoor public talk shows, *Bimeeza*, that proliferated in the early 2000s, often on Saturday mornings.

It meant that the Saturday newspaper edition quite possibly gave the major talking points of these talk shows, then the Sunday early editions either added fuel to the flames or shifted the conversation altogether when they hit the streets. They were conversation starters, and it was almost as close as we got to having a national conversation.

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Daniel K. Kalinaki
In My View



The *Bimeeza* were at once unruly and organised, with speakers coming and going, with a democratic sense that anyone who got to the microphone could say whatever was on their mind. Their banning under some spurious broadcast licensing rules stifled grassroots democracy and the beginning of a national conversation.

These organic in-person communities were later relegated by the emergence of social media, which amplified the message but fragmented the messengers. One did not have to be handed the microphone or even abide by any set of rules of conduct to say their piece.

This was democratic, but it also fired up demagoguery and loosened the gatekeeping and perhaps even the accountability. We didn't see it then, but the loss of these Saturday morning communities and the national conversation they engendered were the first tolling of the bells for the weekend editions.

Fast forward, and the battle for control of the narrative has now shifted to carefully curated online communities, content creators, and influencers. Initially, this was to supplement engagements with mainstream media, for instance, by adding blog-

gers and the sort to the White House “press corps”. Increasingly, however, it is in place of mainstream media. It is telling that the President did not give an interview to a major local media house ahead of the last election. Across the border in Kenya, after President William Ruto was grilled by mainstream media editors during the Gen Z protests, the subsequent engagements were directly with carefully curated commentators on social media.

This “competition” with mainstream media is not necessarily a bad thing. Gatekeeping by mainstream media isn't always transparent and often deprioritises some voices, including those of women, young people and minorities in favour of rent-a-quote “experts”.

Yet there is a real and emerging danger of doing away with the tough questions altogether in favour of engagements and aura farming. This risk is heightened when the incentives of those engaged are more aligned to bread-and-butter issues than to holding power to explain and account.

With any luck, these are merely teething problems and content creators with a firmer appreciation of public policy will emerge to be both interesting, informed, and authentic advocates for the public interest.

The weekend papers – and papers generally – adapted to digital disruption merely as an opportunity to publish to wider audiences. We did not see technology as allowing for asymmetric and opportunistic engagements between audiences and sources that were curated to be vibrant but vacuous, engaging but empty.

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...protects her?