FORUM

ENHANCING PUBLIC INTEREST IN GLOBAL AFFAIRS

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

APRIL 2018
CISA would also like to encourage more journalists to develop personal interests in global affairs...

Kenyan journalists should start to shape the conversations on global affairs
The workshop on “Enhancing Public Interest in Foreign Affairs in Kenya: The Role of the Media”, took place at the Strathmore University Law School’s, Policy Innovation center, on the 18th of April 2018. The forum was organized with the strategic aim of targeting the journalists, editors and media influencers to improve the awareness of the public, more so those in the streets and rural areas, about issues of international affairs and Foreign Policy important to them. Through the workshop, participants were expected to reflect the past, examine the current and project the future role of stakeholders in bringing about necessary initiatives and programs to work closely with the 4th Estate in enhancing public interest in foreign affairs. The participants included representatives from media houses in Kenya, communication organs of various international organizations, the United Nations, Diplomatic missions, academia and students from various institutions.

The discussions explored various issues affecting the theme, where the journalists seemed to be limited to the perimeters of the media house culture and politics that hindered their reporting on matters useful to the public in general not limited to global affairs. The Diplomatic missions and International Organizations on the other hand have conformed to the routines as preceded by mainstream media suffering in return as they remain vulnerable to the dynamics at play. Some of these concerns included language barrier, lack of appreciation of foreign policies of various missions represented in Nairobi, lack of proper research on the part of the journalists that would reflect in the shallow questioning of the diplomats and foreign dignitaries in their explanation of policy direction and agenda. The Education for journalists which emphasizes on ethics and best practice falls short of specialization in International Affairs at the basic level, leaving individual journalists (very few) to pursue further knowledge in this area at post-graduate level.

The session recommended: the establishment of a Joint Initiative through partnerships with Media Stakeholders, Diplomatic Corp, Think Tanks and Academia to fast track the enhancement of Public Interest in Foreign Affairs through content creation for Newspapers, Television, Radio and Online, capitalizing on the Radio platforms for the stakeholders as they have most reach across the country but without educative content; innovating content to align to the New Media Frontiers which include social media platforms to reach the Youth and engage deeper; creation of avenues to engage the public directly for feedback and awareness creation was also highly recommended. Where progress has been made, these efforts need to be amplified through collaboration among the stakeholders since there are no platforms to share best practice where both local and international media are involved.
Introduction

The Kenyan Foreign Policy and Diplomatic environment is yet to be widened and democratized. Since Kenya's independence, Foreign Affairs have been limited to decisions of the elite in the society. The Kenyan Public has little or zero knowledge or influence on the country's foreign relations' philosophy, benefits and development.

Private and Corporate interests around the world have dominated Foreign Policy conversations with collaborations between government and the corporate world taking precedent at the multi-lateral, bi-lateral levels. This leaves the man of the streets out of the discussions held in countries abroad or in private rooms when dignitaries/heads of state/governments visit each other.

Perhaps if there were more voices from the public in these rooms, diplomacy would be better and prospects for peace and enhanced relations would be better. The forum’s target being the media is a strategic long-term investment to improve awareness in the people on the streets and in villages in Kenya.

The media has reported on Kenya’s International Relations, covering diplomatic events, Inter-Governmental Organizations, International Non-Governmental Organizations since the establishment of the media houses. However, the knowledge gap between the Policy makers and the common man remains wide and calls for a creative and innovative approach into shaping Foreign Policy as influenced by the views and spirits of the People.

The objectives of the gathering were not limited to: Identify and examine bottlenecks sustaining minimal or non-existent public interest in diplomatic and foreign affairs news/content on mainstream media and digital platforms; Realize a path to develop foreign affairs and diplomatic content for mainstream media through stakeholders’ engagement and partnerships; Establish a Joint Initiative through partnerships with Media Stakeholders, Diplomatic Corp, Think Tanks and Academia to fast track the enhancement of Public Interest in Foreign Affairs.
Background

There hasn’t been a proper understanding of influences of the media on international reporting of events. It is imperative to understand what really informs what the media writes and what influence does they have on policy, or events within Kenya. It is important for even the citizens to know who they are voting for and whether the leader will take the country to war or not and what his foreign policies are.

This discussion on electoral times have never been given emphasis as the local promises on infrastructure and employment. This has to change. Despite decades of local media reporting on international affairs, the knowledge gap between the policy makers and the common man remains wide and calls for a creative and innovative approach into shaping Foreign Policy as influenced by the views and spirits of the People. The workshop convened stakeholders relevant to the topic under discussion.

Media is a key determinant in influencing public perception, thus opinion, and this extends to foreign policy. For example, most Americans regretted the decision to use military force. Majorities believed the war was not going well, and most said the US troops should return home. This was largely based on media information on the developments in the Middle East. In the UK public opinion, especially on immigration, is thought to have greatly influenced Brexit. But is public opinion effective in Africa? And what are the contributing factors either way? This takes us back to the rate of consumption of news in the country, in particular international news. It also draws us to how media houses treat this segment — international news round-up. Not many local media stations in the country have set aside programmes to feature international and regional news.

For the leading newspapers in the country as well as websites, the common trend is sourcing from international outlets — BBC, Reuters, AFP, Africa News and Financial Times, among others. While the Somali incursion ought to have become a top story in Kenyan media, it was not until the attacks started that Kenyans started saying we needed to withdraw. It was not until 2014 when Al Shabaab started killing non-locales working as quarry workers in Northeastern that people right in rural Nyeri realized how close the issue was to them despite it being miles away.

And why are local media houses investing or not investing in foreign reporting? It has been observed that foreign reporting editors, rely less on permanent foreign bureaus and more on freelancers, home-based reporters and ad hoc bureaus. Increased emphasis is put on enriched content setting output apart from the online news stream. What then is the next step in ensuring media covers adequately international news and how then will the public be included in these policies shaping conversations.
The Panel Discussants

Ambassador Marek Garztecki
Permanent Representative to
UNEP & UN Habitat and the
Deputy Head of Mission,
Embassy of Poland

Newton Kankema
Deputy Director
United Nations Information Centre
in Nairobi

Dr. George Morara Nyabuga
Senior lecturer at the University of Nairobi’s
School of Journalism & Mass Communication.

Discussions & Outcomes

The forum sought to cover discussions around how the media relates and interacts with bilateral and multilateral diplomatic spheres, the United Nations, Academia, Government, Parliament in their work in “enhancing public interest in foreign affairs”.

The discussion on Bi-lateral affairs, explored the official and unofficial communication structures as set up by Governments to relay, inform and engage the public on state-led diplomatic events and activities; and their foreign policies. The presenter sought to highlight the past experiences and lessons from a Government perspective in working with the Media and accountability to the public on foreign policy issues. The panel discussion was to discuss the prospect on best approaches and partnerships necessary to fill the information gap between the policy makers and the public on the International Relations by Government and its agencies.

The print media is much more responsible for more reporting than any other news sources. However, the internet is slowly transforming the news media, because more people are relying on online sources for news. Journalists cannot report on an infinite number of stories therefore they should choose which ones are the most newsworthy to present to the public. They media helps in setting the agenda since it determines what will be discussed in public. Therefore, the media signals which stories are the most important when they decide what to report.

Media and especially journalism have a relevant role in many aspects of development, ranging from governance, empowerment amongst other issues. They are a condition for legitimate and free elections, in the sense that they promote public and critical debate that democracy needs to thrive. The media, and especially social media, can empower people, particularly helping them understand the local and global context. The media is also responsible for providing support for effective governance, communicating actions of governments, their shortcomings and their achievements. Media opens dialogue between governments and people, so that those in charge make decisions based on real needs.

In order for the media to get interested in diplomacy, there is need to package international affairs in a way the public can be able to relate. However, there have been challenges to this as it’s not important what one says, but what the media wants to hear, probably in the context of what is happening in the country that one is representing.

Diplomacy & Media

A key concern raised was whether traditional diplomacy is still relevant, in an age of information explosion on various platforms and where leaders can now state their policies through tweets and the likes. The internet and social media platforms have been very instrumental for politics and diplomacy. These mediums have been used to voice opinions in global politics especially because the world is becoming smaller, and
face to face meeting between key leaders is becoming minimal, due to
the process of globalization. The technological advancements that have
come about to facilitate global communication has had an affect on the
conduct of diplomacy.

During the cold war, the US and the Soviet Union extensively utilized
public diplomacy and in order to shape public attitudes all over the
world, towards their respective ideologies. It is probably at this time that
most politicians realized the power of the media and started to look for
ways in which they can have influence through them, including having
ownership of some of the media stations.

The New media or the digital era has made information gathering,
processing and analyzing a huge challenge and therefore diplomats have
that key role to react quickly to misinformation. Many journalists have
superficial views on international affairs, diplomats are being able to
filter information and identify what is important. Therefore, the essentials
of diplomacy will always remain, since everyday information, requires the
traditional diplomats be there.

Diplomats also represent the economic interest of their countries, and
therefore these are things that are put at the forefront, since it has the
opportunity/chance to transform peoples’ lives, and therefore one cannot
just do it with the media. The same applies to other pillars of diplomacy,
such as cultural diplomacy etc. It therefore points out that the relevance
of diplomats in an era of fake news is very important to clarify
information about their people and the countries they serve.

Challenges Facing Media in
Dissemination of Global Affairs

We are a product of what we see and what we read the newspapers. The
media have enormous responsibility to inform the public accurately. They
shape the thoughts and the perceptions of the public regarding different
issues. However, so many challenges stand in the line of enhancing
public interest in international development possibly this has been
curtailed by social media, as well as the journalist reluctance to take time
to research on the story.

The existence of media corruption, actually makes it difficult for media to
be independent. Brown envelope journalism has taken root among most
journalist in Kenya. It is when news sources offer facilitation or cash
handouts to individual journalist, with the intention of appealing to the
local decision making in exchange for uncritical media coverage. These
practices take several forms, such as journalists demanding news sources
to pay for transport, accommodation, meals etc. In others, journalists
approach sources or event organizers and boldly ask for money before
they provide any coverage. Others sometimes go back to the sources after
they have published their stories and either hint on expecting a reward for
a job well done or directly ask for their payoff. This has dented the
integrity of journalism.

The journalists in the forum, expressed their concern about this practice
and rationalized their willingness to accept money from sources on the
grounds that they don't get any transport and related allowances from
their organizations. Journalists also do not research original stories based
on independent research and this inhibits in-depth reporting of issues.
Some journalists depend on the use of social media to as sources of
information for reporting stories. However, this has some risks to the
practice of journalism.

Lack of specialization in international development and reporting is also
an issue that came up as a challenge. Because of lack of specialization
Journalists often like to write on everything, the consequence of this is
that journalists would report half-truths as they do not critically
understand and contextualize the issues they are reporting on. There is
also the possibility that certain voices, which are important are left out,
during the reporting. The academic realities versus the culture of
newsrooms also affects journalism and coverage of IR that despite several
universities offering quality courses on Journalism, the culture in
newsrooms have led many aspiring journalists to be dependent rather
than independent. Some government agencies were also said at times to
deny giving out information regarding signed treaties and agreements.
This is said to hinder the journalist from getting finer details of the
agreements to disseminate to the public.

The ownership of the media is a major factor in determining the quality
and quantity of coverage accorded in particular issues. What this means
is that the media content is often determined by what their owners,
managers and editors, think will interest their target audiences. This
brings into purview, issues to do with gate-keeping, and how they affect
the making of decisions at the decision-making level of diplomats and
leaders among stakeholders in international affairs. Media owners would
employ people who would propel their ideas, in order for them to make
profit at the expense of information sharing that can spur development.
They only want to sell news which people would want to hear.

On the academic Perspective of the issue of media and public interest
the conversation delved into the thoughts and ideas that necessitate the engagement of the public on global affairs. The discussions also investigated the discourses that have shaped up the relationship of the region/country. Of key discussion was the twitter effect and how much information can one communicate on twitter and what is the credibility of the media in reporting important issues communicated through twitter, especially in the era of fake media.

Conclusion

In attempting to increase more coverage of international affairs by media, tackling media interests and the problem of brown envelope. In the reality of economics, CISA and other stakeholders should be willing to support content production in the Newspapers and other types of mainstream media, so as to increase awareness of the public in matters pertaining to international affairs.

Currently as it is there is no counter-opinion to what the policymakers disseminate. The interest groups should be willing to buy spaces in newspapers in order generate public interests in foreign affairs. If there is public interest, then this automatically will lead to a more aware population.

Diplomatic missions should package information that can contain buzzwords and a little bit of infotainment to showcase the work the impact of the work they do in Kenya. This will also help in selling their countries economic interests to the ordinary Kenyan. This will involve presenting global affairs in terms of human relations and not just governments sitting in boardrooms to sign agreements and treaties. Journalists present were encouraged to invest in news collection strategies to enable them break the story and not receive the story. This would involve diving deep to source for news on development which currently are not widely covered by media houses in Kenya.

Way Forward

Funding is one of the most challenging aspect in organizing any Forum. The Media Forum was just one amongst the many to come, however this can only be possible through financial funding that can support the logistics to ensure successful future forums. CISA would also wish to open its door to any form of partnership with media houses that will enable increased dissemination of international affairs and knowledge to the citizens. These partnerships can be in both print and electronic media platforms. CISA considers the media as a strategic partner for long-term investment to improve awareness in the people on the streets and in villages in Kenya.

CISA would also like to encourage more journalists to develop personal interests in global affairs. The world is becoming smaller and interconnected and therefore Kenyan journalists should start to shape the conversations on global affairs.

Radio has wide coverage, but it isn’t being used to pass on important information, Radio has been so commercialized in Kenya, and has been taken over by celebrities, who often are hired for the main reasons that they have influence over their audiences.
CISA would like to acknowledge Strathmore Law School’s Dr. Luis Franceschi for hosting the event. This has been mainly a success because of his commitment to see more media coverage of global affairs in Kenya.

**Acknowledgement**

Special thanks go to CISA members who tirelessly worked to ensure the success of the forum they include:

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