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Exploring Trust/Mistrust in Journalistic Practice: An Actor-network Analysis of a Kenyan Newsroom

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ABSTRACT

The entry of non-traditional actors into aspects of journalistic practice has been widely explored in scholarship, as have expressions of the public's trust in journalistic work. However, there is a scarcity of research addressing the construct of trust in relation to the interactions among traditional and non-traditional journalism actors engaged in news production. Through the use of actor-network theory and by applying qualitative case study design, this study focused on the nature of journalistic practice in a digitally disrupted Kenyan newsroom, and how trust/mistrust manifested itself within the actor-network of journalistic practice. Theoretical and thematic analyses established the social and technological actors that had joined the process of journalistic practice while four findings emerged addressing notions of trust/mistrust within the actor-network. These findings were as follows: trust occurs within an established routinized process; trust is enacted within a particular news media environment; new entrants in journalistic practice need to demonstrate value to gain trusted entry in the actor-network; and trust is engendered at institutional level but needs acceptance at individual level.

KEYWORDS

Trust; actor-network theory; actors; non-traditional actors; news ecosystem; journalistic practice; newsroom; Kenya

Introduction and background

A body of scholarship has recognized the entry of multiple social, material and technological participants engaged in contemporary journalism production across African, European and American contexts. A variety of terms are used to describe these myriad contributors including actors (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018; Lewis and Westlund 2015; Mesquita and de-Lima-Santos 2021; Turner 2005), digital intermediaries (González-Tosat and Sádaba-Chalezquer 2021), peripheral actors (Chua and Duffy 2019; Tandoc, Jr. 2019; Wahutu 2019), strangers, interlopers and intralopers (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018) or the liminal press (Weber and Kosterich 2018).

These non-traditional actors in journalistic practice include algorithms, communities, content management systems, data visualization specialists and fact-checking organizations working alongside traditional journalists (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018; González-Tosat and Sádaba-Chalezquer 2021; Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018; Mesquita and de-Lima-Santos 2021; Paulussen 2016; Primo and Zabo 2014; Rodgers 2015; Weber and Kosterich 2018).

As Agarwal and Barthel (2015) noted in their study of online journalists, there have emerged “tension and boundary struggles” (p. 379) between traditional journalists and newer entrants to newsroom work, such as in who constitutes a journalist. These tensions then raise the question about what these challenges mean for the production of news and the credibility of the news product.

Normative, sociological and functional approaches have tended to broadly ascribe great power to the news media, as a necessary and trusted source of information, contributor to societal cohesion and social order, a site of cultural exchange, a mainstay of democratic society and interpreter and meaning-maker of human experience (Grätz 2011; Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018; Fink 2019; Turner 2005).

Even as these roles and functions are not viewed as fixed or constant, particularly in the digital age (Deuze and Witschge 2018), they do point to the view of the news media as a trustworthy source and mediator of information for a wide public. The trustworthiness of journalism has been studied from the perspective of normative media studies, news media credibility among audiences/news consumers, media as an enabler of political trust, fake news and source credibility (Enli and Rosenberg 2018; Fisher 2018; Fink 2019; Hanitzsch and Berganza 2014; Hermans, Vergeer, and d’Haenens 2009; Mare, Mabweazara, and Moyo 2019; Strömbäck et al. 2020; Swart and Broersma 2021; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019).

However, there is a scarcity of literature on trust within the newsroom or as enacted among actors engaged in news production. These actors include the journalists themselves and more recently, the non-traditional contributors to journalism content within the physical newsroom or wider news ecosystem (Anderson 2011). The construct of trust within and in relation to the newsroom remains valuable as it contributes to the quality and credibility of information that is availed by the news media to its audiences (Edelman Trust Barometer 2021; Fink 2019; Wasserman 2020). This is made more imperative given the new players digital technologies have introduced to journalistic practice.

By use of actor-network theory (ANT), this study addresses the manifestation of trust among the social and technological actors engaged in news production in a contemporary Kenyan newsroom. Traditional sociological theory tends to presume the term “actor” refers to a human being, but ANT posits that actors may be human, material or conceptual. ANT uses actant and actor-network as key terms, the former referring to any actor that can act or make a difference within a collaborative interaction with other actors, or can associate or disassociate with other actors (Latour 2005). Texts, concepts, human beings, technical artefacts and other objects are presumed to have agency in a particular context and can each be actants (Crawford 2005; Latour 2005). The actor-network is visually represented by nodes interlinked by arrows.

This study limited itself to human and technological actants whose revealed interactions opened up the “black box”—or what is hidden—of contemporary journalistic practice. By its agnostic attitude towards whom or what constitutes “an actor” within a particular context, ANT enables an assessment of the collaborative interaction between the social and technological actors that interact in the course of journalistic practice.

The acknowledgement of non-human actants towards the formation of the actor-network and of journalistic practice is a key difference between ANT and other theoretical approaches, such as techno-determinism’s focus on a causal relationship between technology and mass media and socio-constructivism’s study of technology use within

broader institutional and societal contexts (Bosch 2014; Dolwick 2009; Hermans, Vergeer, and d'Haenens 2009; Lievrouw, 2014; Mabweazara 2014; Mare 2014).

The actor-network of journalistic practice in this study refers to the assembly of interactions among social and technological actants. Using ANT enabled an appreciation of the agency social and technological actants had in the actor-network, and enabled the establishment of trust/mistrust among particular actants as they engaged in journalistic practice.

Literature review

In the past, the production of news has been viewed as a homogenized process comprised of particular routines, roles and norms (Deuze and Witschge 2018; Nyamnjoh 2005). Journalism has since undergone change, transforming from a relatively stable profession with particular values and expressions to a fluid, varied and diverse range of practices (Deuze and Witschge 2018).

Journalism practice has been established to take place in a variety of spaces and ecologies (Anderson 2011; Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018) and is not always conducted within institutional settings (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018). However, the newsroom remains a central point of focus in journalism studies given that it is where much of the organization and production of news continues to take place (Deuze and Witschge 2018).

This is the case for Africa's mass media journalism, whose structures, technologies and genres were imports and products of colonialism. What was introduced before independence in many African states did not change leading to a "universalism" in the professional values, programme format, style and schedules of African broadcasters compared to their counterparts in other parts of the world (Berger 2012; Bielsa 2008; Karikari 2007; Nyamnjoh 2005).

Starting in the early 1990s, the liberalization of the news media across the African continent and an eventually explosive rise in the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) disrupted the existing media landscape. The former was instrumental in the rise of commercial broadcasting across much of the continent while the latter led to the incorporation of digital technologies in mainstream media houses (Berger 2012; Karikari 2007; Mare 2013; Mbeke et al., 2010; Mwesige and Kalinaki 2007; Ugangu 2012).

This incorporation manifested itself across different parts of Africa in various practices, such as: the establishment of websites, blogs and social media accounts by the news media; the use of the web as a news platform alongside print and broadcast; the push for journalists to be multiskilled so as to produce content for the converged platforms; and the incorporation of user-generated content (UGC) into other news work (Bosch 2014; Mabweazara 2014; Mare 2014; Mudhai 2014; Paterson 2013; Sambuli 2015).

In a bid to establish which actors were engaged in journalistic practice, this article focused on a Kenyan FM radio station that had incorporated multiple digital technologies in news production. Örnebring (2016) distinguishes between the work of journalism and the institution of journalism, treating the former as the daily routines undertaken by individuals in the course of producing news content. He defines journalism the institution as a set of shared norms and routines "as created and maintained by a specific and historically contingent set of organizations" (3).

This paper uses the former as its definition of journalistic practice, seeking to establish the actors engaged in the day-to-day processes of producing news, and further interrogating the nature of their engagement by focusing on aspects of trust/mistrust.

Journalism actors

Journalism has long been viewed in relatively stable, conventional terms revolving around habitual practices and skills (such as interviewing and story packaging) conducted within a set time frame (on fixed deadlines) by particular professional roles. Some of those roles would also be medium-specific, such as photographers in print, newsreaders on radio and camera personnel for television (Deuze and Witschge 2018; Hermans, Vergeer, and d'Haenens 2009).

However, the predictable would become unpredictable as newsroom roles, spatial locations, and range of work changed with the entry of digital technologies. Early newsroom ethnographies focused on sources, journalists and audiences as the primary players in journalistic work (Gans 2004; Tuchman, 1973; Turner 2005). The three groups were analytically distinct, linked as follows: "sources reveal information, journalists gather and package it, and audience members receive and digest it" (Turner 2005, p. 322).

Turner (2005) observed that digital technologies had blurred the lines between source, news producer and audience, where one individual could hold all three roles at a go. As the Internet and other digital technologies begun to be incorporated in journalism, scholars turned their gaze to how the traditional newsroom actors appropriated various digital artefacts for routine journalism tasks.

On the African continent, the entry of digital technologies such as the Internet had coincided with a wave of political reforms, which in turn contributed to widespread media liberalisation across the continent. These transformations yielded an often techno-deterministic body of literature that studied the news media's engagement with various ICTs against a backdrop of dynamic political and media regulatory environments (Mare 2013).

Early studies on the use of digital technologies in journalistic work remained newsroom-centric, focused on the uptake of digital technologies in news production as undertaken by traditional journalists. These technologies included email, the mobile phone, the Internet and social media, which were useful tools for finding and communicating with sources, news gathering and writing, sharing and promotion of stories, and enabling new interactions between journalists, sources and audiences (Mare 2013; Nyabuga and Booker 2013).

Short text messaging (SMS) enabled new forms of participatory journalism (Paterson 2013) while the portability of the Internet-enabled mobile phone allowed remote working and a bypassing of traditional gatekeeping roles, such as the editing of every story before publication. The widespread adoption of social media by mainstream media houses and among audiences, journalists and sources also enabled new forms of public discourse, information sharing, and creation of individual journalist identities (Ogola 2015; Paterson 2013).

A body of newsroom ethnographic studies would focus on the adoption of various technologies in journalistic practice in newsrooms across the continent including

Egypt, Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Rooted in socio-constructivism, they addressed themselves to newsroom ecologies in the different countries, and the uptake of technologies in those politico-economic contexts (Bosch 2014; El Gody 2014; Mabweazara 2014; Mare 2014).

Researcher scrutiny would begin to reach beyond the newsroom to recognize what Anderson (2010) referred to as the news ecosystem. Banda (2010) and Sambuli (2015) were among scholars that recognized new players in Africa's news production processes such as citizen journalists. Since then, a body of work globally has recognized the scope of individuals and entities engaged in journalism has expanded to include "actors doing journalism but are not (yet) considered as journalists" (Tandoc, Jr. 2019, 139).

Alternately termed digital intermediaries (González-Tosat and Sádaba-Chalezquer 2021) or peripheral actors (Tandoc, Jr. 2019; Wahutu 2019), these range from human beings in particular roles to material/technological artefacts include fact-checking organizations, data visualization specialists, business executives, experts in audience analysis, technologists, news aggregators such as Yahoo, computer code, software and content management systems (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018; González-Tosat and Sádaba-Chalezquer 2021; Rodgers 2015; Weber and Kosterich 2018; Westlund, Krumsvik Arne, and Lewis 2021).

The emphasis in the scholarship is on the social or institutional actors engaging in journalistic practice. However, scholarship in science and technology studies has contributed to expanded views of the nature of the "actor", enabling a recognition of technological and other material artefacts as contributing factors in a social phenomenon. This approach ascribes centrality to both technology and to people, viewing technology as a co-participant rather than causal agent within society (Boczkowski 2005; Dickinson, Matthews, and Saltzis 2013; Lewis and Westlund, 2015; Lievrouw 2014), and is expressed in theories such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which is used in this study.

ANT enables the conceptual analysis of collective socio-technical processes that are unseen or taken for granted. It recognizes the various individual elements within an actor-network—be they human, textual, or physical artefact—that associate with each other to form a transformative interaction. From an ANT perspective, all elements engaged in collaborative interaction have agency, meaning that they each may cause transformation and that transformation can be observed or traced (Latour 2005).

Turner (2005) was an early proponent of ANT use in journalism studies, and the approach has since been found useful in enabling an analysis of technology as an active contributor to social interactions in the digital age, and in studying the fluidity of actors and practices in contemporary journalism (Couldry 2008; Othman 2019; Wiard 2019). Multiple studies have since applied the approach including, Hemmingway (2008), Plesner (2009) and Staph (2019), revealing that actor-networks of journalistic practice can be distinct in the technologies and new social actors that they incorporate.

These ANT-centred studies have focused on digital cultures and journalistic practice as enacted by the various actors—traditional or otherwise. By use of ANT this article seeks to expand the discourse on journalism actors in a contemporary Kenyan newsroom by establishing the particular social and technological actants engaged in its journalistic practice.

The following terms are used in ANT: the actor-network, which in this paper refers to the assembly of relations among social and technological entities. It is visually represented by nodes interlinked by arrows. The black box refers to a stable association of actors, processes or interactions that act as one whole but whose inner workings are not always disaggregated or fully known (Hemmingway 2008; Waldherr, Geise, and Katzenbach 2019).

Enrolment makes reference to the process of getting other actants to participate in the construction of the actor-network. Flows of translation refer to the changing and co-existing of mediators within an actor-network represented by arrows connecting the various actants. Because there are multiple mediators in a particular situation, there are multiple translations taking place (Latour 2005).

A mediator is an actor that undergoes frequent translation and change while interacting with other actants (Latour 2005), while a network refers to a descriptive rendering of the traceable associations between actants, manifested in the activities that took place between them and in the transformations that resulted (Latour 2005).

An obligatory point of passage makes reference to the means through which other actors have to go (Hemmingway 2008; Latour 2005).

Trust in journalism scholarship

Scholars have viewed the concept of trust in journalism in various ways. Fisher (2016) treats it as a slippery term with no fixed definition, while Sztompka (1999) considers it to be a sociological construct that involves an expectation that others will act virtuously towards an individual. DiMaggio (2005) views it as a component within the larger construct of “social capital”, which refers to features of structure and organisation within a shared or collective context. “Credibility” is often used as a synonymous term (Kohring and Matthes 2007).

There are two perspectives of trust in relation to journalism (Blöbaum 2014). One focuses on the public’s trust in journalists and in the work the journalists do. The other is the trust found within and among the journalism profession. The latter has received scanty scholarly attention while the former—which is often focused on citizen trust of the news media and, more recently, the construct of “fake news”—has a large body of work such as that done by Fink (2019), Kohring and Matthes (2007), Moehler and Singh (2011), Tsfati and Ariely (2014), Wasserman (2021) and Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019).

Kohring and Matthes (2007) developed a tool to gauge audience trust in news media, while multicountry comparative studies addressed audience expressions or attitudes of trust towards news media in Africa and across the globe, respectively (Moehler and Singh 2011; Tsfati and Ariely 2014). A global study of 66 countries questioned how journalists perceived the trustworthiness of news media as a social institution (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2017).

Scholarship on the emergence of fake news has also skewed towards content or audiences. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) examined audience exposure and response to disinformation/misinformation in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. They found audiences had low levels of trust in social and mass media, and high levels of perceived exposure to fake news. Other scholarship includes mainstream news

coverage of fake news, the emergence of fact-checking, and audience perceptions or exposure to disinformation or misinformation online or on social media (Tsfati et al. 2020; Wasserman 2020). Pingree et al. (2013) referenced scholarship on “gatekeeping trust”, which was defined as an understanding that story selection within the news media is based on how journalists evaluate the importance of the issues addressed in the stories.

Fink (2019) reflects on a waning of public trust in journalists, a phenomenon experienced in the Kenyan context where from the late 1990s into the mid-2000s, citizens ranked the Kenyan news media among the most trusted institutions in the country (Mwita 2021; Ng’etich 2016; Orengo 2012). However, the Kenyan media have since experienced a decline in trust among audiences, which is attributed in part to their perceived partisanship along ethnic or political lines and to an over-commitment to profit over provision of credible news (Mwita 2021).

Concerning trust within the journalism profession, there is literature that has addressed practices/processes internal to the work of journalism namely source credibility and medium credibility of which the latter includes perceptions among newspaper journalists of the credibility of Internet news (Cassidy 2007; Golan 2010).

There is also a body of scholarship that has recognized the entry of new players in newsroom work alongside the traditional players. The Kenya media landscape dates back to the establishment of the print press in the late 1800s with the subsequent introduction of radio and television in 1928 and 1962, respectively. The various media entities were mostly associated with colonial authorities, missionaries or the white settler establishment. From that period, non-traditional media actors have entered the media landscape, including African indigenous newspapers in the post-World War II colonial period (Frederiksen 2006), print publications that emerged in the liberalized media landscape of the late 1990s (Mwita 2021), social media and citizen journalists (Sambuli 2015).

As they have entered the media landscape, the new entities have variously been referred to as the “gutter press” (Frederiksen 2006; Mwita 2021), or in the case of citizen journalism, dismissed as “amateurish” and lacking quality verification of content (Sambuli 2015, 74). Further, there have been concerns raised among mainstream journalists about editors and media proprietors who would serve as hacks for hire, killing stories in exchange for bribes, selling entire print runs to those exposed in nefarious activities, and allowing the intimidation and name-tarnishing of politicians and other leaders by their rivals (Nyamnjoh 2005; Madowo 2015).

More recently, this scholarship includes the studies by Muindi (2018), Wahutu (2019), and Wamunyu and Wahutu (2019), who evaluate the entry of social media and technological actors in Kenyan newsrooms. Chua and Duffy (2019) and Agarwal and Barthel (2015) interrogate the tensions that have manifested themselves between traditional newsroom personnel and newer, peripheral players (2019). Westlund, Krumsvik Arne, and Lewis (2021) address the constructs of collaboration and coordination among actors in different departments within a news organization and the subsequent implications on media innovation. Implicit in these last three studies is the notion of trust among the actors as they engage in the process of news production.

However, there remains limited study of how the construct of trust manifests itself within digitally disrupted journalism and among its personnel. Gatekeeping theory suggests that in past standardized journalism practice, there existed an implicit trust

among news production personnel and newsroom peers would treat each other as members of a fraternity, producing work in assembly line fashion and routines even as they lacked direct audience contact (Breed 1955, cited in Schwalbe, Silcock, and Candello 2015).

The adoption and use of new technologies in a particular context have led to new rules and relationships emerging (Ndemo and Weiss 2017; Starr 2004). This can lead to tension and boundary struggles, such as those recorded by Agarwal and Barthel (2015) among traditional and online journalists. However, there remain gaps in understanding what those challenges have meant in regards to trust among the traditional and non-traditional actors engaged in contemporary news production.

The study therefore aimed to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which social and technological actors engaged in news production before and after the incorporation of digital technologies at the station under study?

RQ2: In what ways did the construct of trust/mistrust manifest among the actors engaged in news production?

Methodology

I used a case study approach to focus on a newsroom actor-network in the Kenyan mediascape. The case study is commonly used in ANT research (Law 2009) and enables in-depth scrutiny of a phenomenon *in situ*. Actor-network theory is focused on the assembling of relations among different actants. Tracing the social and technological actants established the actor-network of journalistic practice at the station.

From observation and interviews, ANT enabled the analysis of the composition and functioning of an established actor-network of journalistic practice in a newsroom that had embraced traditional and non-traditional actors. The media house selected was a commercial FM radio station that began transmission in 1996. In late 1997, it had set up a website, which underwent various transformations over the years, changing from a basic site offering company announcements to an interactive, user-focused platform with thousands of pages of multimedia content. Over time, it had acquired a reputation for breaking news and being an early adopter of multiple digital technologies. Data were collected over a three-month period.

To establish the actants engaged in news production and further interrogate notions of trust among them, I engaged in non-participant observation over 120 hours as well as conducted unstructured interviews with 20 purposively selected individuals. Of these, 18 worked in the newsroom and digital space, senior management, administration and radio production. Additional interviews were held with two former station employees who had insights into the early years of the incorporation of digital technologies into journalistic work. Interviewees were purposively sampled based on the work they did (for instance, reporter and editor), their accessibility and willingness to be interviewed.

Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2013) described observation as a relatively unstructured process that is generally linked to understanding why something happens and exposing the underlying intangible reasons behind what is seen, such as rules and norms. Further, it

is useful in exposing knowledge that cannot be articulated or recounted in an interview (Mason 2011). It is during observation that the manifestation of newsroom trust—among social and technological actors—began to emerge.

The unstructured interview as defined by Rubin and Rubin (2012) enabled discussions that started with a general topic that would lead to specific questions as the interview proceeded in response to what the interviewee said. This approach also encouraged the interviewees to speak at length and in vivid detail, revealing members of the actor-network and the manifestation of trust/mistrust among them.

The data were captured in various formats: field notes for the observations and transcriptions of the interviews. Theoretical and thematic analyses enabled the establishment of the actants and actor-network and of four trust-related themes. The National Council of Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) provided authorization for this research to be conducted.

Findings

A theoretical analysis based on ANT enabled the tracing of the actor-network engaged in journalistic practice at the station. Four themes subsequently emerged in addressing notions of trust/mistrust within the actor-network, as follows: trust occurs within an established routinized process; trust is enacted within a particular social environment; new entrants in journalistic practice demonstrate value to gain trusted entry in the actor-network; and trust engendered at institutional level but needs acceptance at individual level.

RQ1: Which social and technological actors engaged in news production before and after the incorporation of digital technologies at the station under study?

The establishing of the actors involved in the station's pre-digital and post-digital journalistic practice took place through observation, interviews and document review. Using activities observed on two different days, I established that news production was focused on creation of content for radio, mobile phone and web. The content came from two distinct physical spaces termed "newsroom" and "digital" and was deployed as follows: sports, business or general news content generated from the newsroom, aired on radio, published on the company website, and select news items sent to mobile phone subscribers; web-exclusive lifestyle or entertainment content generated from "digital"; posts on company social media accounts published by both newsroom and digital personnel.

Prior to the entry of digital technologies in newsroom work, journalistic practice at the newsroom under study revolved around sources, newsroom personnel (editors, reporters, and newsreaders) and audiences. Strong source-networks were required of the editors and reporters to enable access to information. Editors assigned stories to reporters who gathered information from sources. The reporters developed radio scripts—of four or five lines with an audio clip—from the information gathered and passed them on to editors for review and compilation into news bulletins. The editors then passed on the bulletins to the newsreaders to present to their audiences through conventional radio broadcasting. The editors, reporters and newsreaders all worked from the same spatial

location, termed the newsroom. There was a hierarchical interaction with the editors overseeing the schedules and work of the reporters and newsreaders (Participant interviews; Observation notes).

Using Gans' (2004) analysis of newsroom actors (which consisted exclusively of human personnel) as well as data collected from the newsroom under study, an actor-network of the pre-web newsroom at the radio station was constructed as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 is an illustration of pre-web journalistic practice, which was constituted as a linear process with the story beginning from information derived from sources. Radio was the technology around which the work revolved, and the content reached it via a linear process in which a series of personnel performed. Reporters and editors used their own judgement to present stories that would be of interest to what Bunce (2017) described as the imagined or ignored audience. One interview participant described the audience as being in other room, unseen and not fully known.

We used to broadcast from this room and we'd hear people laughing on the other side of the room, but we never saw them. With online, we basically just opened that window. (Participant 1)

Journalistic practice would begin to change, however, with the adoption of digital technologies. New personnel and technological entities became part of the actor-network with the number of actants engaged in news production increasing from seven to 21. The new actants comprised of camera personnel, the webmaster, developers, designers, digital media administrators and various hardware (smartphones and computers) and software (web and mobile phone applications).

The entry of new roles often occurred organically as needs arose. The role of the digital media administrator (occasionally referred to as the social media administrator), for instance, was introduced after the newsroom editors realized they could not effectively manage their existing editorial duties with the additional need that had arisen to promote their stories on social media networks. The head of the newsroom recalled how this position came about in this edited interview excerpt.

I think I'm the one who brought up the discussion, and I said it was becoming a bit of a challenge having the person in the news, let's say the editors, pushing content ... There's need to push content out a lot and if you're not, somebody else is. Now when you're focusing on

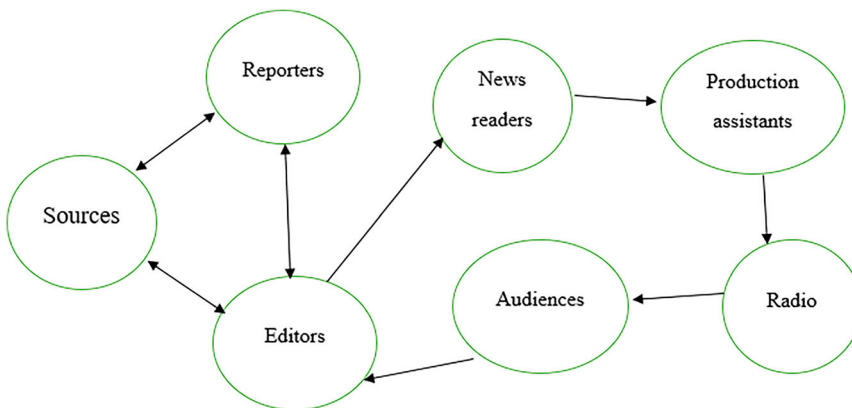


Figure 1. Station newsroom actors in pre-web journalistic practice.

other things, you lose track. And you know you may end up making mistakes. So we suggested that we need to have somebody whose business when they wake up and go to sleep is pushing our content on the digital platform. So that's how [the digital media administrator] role came about. (Head of the newsroom interview.)

The expanded actor-network is shown in [Figure 2](#).

The entry of digital technologies in newsroom production meant that both technological and human actants were collaborating in a journalistic practice whose progression was non-linear and multidirectional. Radio, however, remained a technological actant on which content was produced through the pre-digital linear process.

Digital technologies were deeply embedded in the journalistic practice at the station, requiring investment in infrastructures (Internet access, an array of digital devices and software applications for content production, packaging and distribution), new personnel (camera people, writers, social media managers, web master) and new distribution partners (an external content distributing company for mobile news).

The entry of new personnel in news production also led to the emergence of two working spaces at the station, separated by a wall and distinct in their working styles



Figure 2. The digitally disrupted actor-network of journalistic practice.

and content. This conformed to the contention in Robinson (2011), that the entry of a new technology leads to changes in the physical space in which the work it is used for is done.

The two spaces were referred to as “newsroom” and “digital”, respectively, the former being the enclosed room that served as the site of production of traditional news fare including sports, business and general news. The work in this space was conducted in the typical, formal hierarchy of newsrooms.

“Digital” consisted of a group of technical, content and business development personnel working in an open space with other departments (including marketing and radio programming). Two editors and a webmaster were based in the “digital” space and were primarily concerned with the production and distribution of exclusively digital content comprised of lifestyle-focused fare. The working atmosphere in the “digital” space was informal and relaxed, with a more collaborative approach to developing and editing of content.

Reporters, writers, editors and newsreaders were actants carried over from the broadcast-only actor-network. They continued generating news content but with some modification of roles. The newsreader had acquired new tasks of uploading international content onto the website, and the writers—a term that distinguished them from the reporters—had published exclusively online for new website feature sections.

The owner played an integral role in the changes by his willingness to incorporate digital technologies across news work and introducing new roles (such as camera personnel and the web designers) to provide visual and technical support to news production. Most human actants in the actor-network had taken up the distribution of stories through their social media networks and also paid attention to audience feedback and engagement, made available through web metrics. Editors paid greater attention to audience activity—made available through web metrics—in deciding which stories to cover and what angles would resonate more with audiences.

Sources could now be found online, could share information on chat application WhatsApp and other internet-enabled applications such as social media, and social media posts often served as source material for stories. Audiences were more visible and better defined due to web metrics, and also contributed to the content of the web by posting comments and sharing stories on social media networks.

The web had led to the inclusion of the webmaster and digital media administrator into the post-digital newsroom’s actor-network. These two roles were involved in story conceptualization and distribution, which became distinct aspects of journalistic practice at the newsroom. Web designers and developers played a supporting role in designing and maintaining the company’s website, respectively. The web designer and developer roles were also directly attributable to the incorporation of the web in the work of the radio station.

RQ2: In what ways did the construct of trust/mistrust manifest among the actors engaged in news production?

Four themes emerged in addressing notions of trust/mistrust within the actor-network, as follows: trust occurs within an established routinized process; trust is enacted within a particular media context; new entrants in journalistic practice demonstrate value to gain trusted entry in the actor-network; and trust engendered at institutional level needs acceptance at individual level.

Trust occurs within an established routinized process

Pre-digital journalistic practice followed linear, predictable patterns with the editors invested with gatekeeping authority and access controls in the content management systems limiting who could publish and when. In the digitally networked actor-network, the news production process incorporated new actors in the form of technologies (digital infrastructures, devices and applications), personnel (webmaster, developers, web designers) and external parties (content distribution partners).

In both cases, journalistic practice had acquired a particular process and rhythm, even with the entry of new actants. Sources and audiences remained essential as active participants to the journalistic practice. One interview participant indicated that he received tips from audience members about stories relating to crime and security matters because the audience members knew it would get exposed. Another interview participant indicated that despite having access to social media sites that provided information, audiences still trusted the news media to verify and confirm information.

As journalists we ... move [the story] to the more important aspects of that story. The audience of today is knowledgeable and still relies on us to give them information ... Our role is still there. I don't see social media replacing the media. (Participant 1)

Technological actants were also incorporated in the routines of journalistic practice and became a trusted part of the actor-network. For instance, the station invested heavily in digital infrastructure (such as Internet access via wireless and mobile phone bundles, gadgets including smartphones and software applications such as Whatsapp), incorporating them across all aspects of news production, such as: communicating with sources; content development, packaging and distribution; audience interaction; social media engagement; and internal newsroom communication. News production was enabled even remotely as editorial staff received mobile phone data bundles to access and use the Internet while outside the newsroom or "digital" space. Therefore, stability and reliability of the technological infrastructure were essential elements required of the various digital technologies as actants in journalistic practice.

Trust/mistrust is enacted within a particular media context.

The Kenyan mediascape was well established from colonial times with accepted players (mainstream media houses) and routines. However, new entrants to the news media establishment had a history of being treated suspiciously by their mainstream counterparts (Nyamnjoh 2005; Madowo 2015; Sambuli 2015).

This history explained the non-use of UGC in the radio station. Past literature had indicated that Kenyan media houses made use of UGC and that news organisations also encouraged audiences to respond to stories or send in their own content (Nyabuga and Booker 2013). However, at the radio station, the head of the newsroom expressed caution about UGC and online sources. He referenced the proliferation of fake information on social media in noting that one could not always be sure about the credibility of information that was not generated inside the newsroom.

We're the ones who want the public to send us stuff. But I'll tell you why, maybe, newsrooms may be a bit cautious with that. It's because there's a lot of false stuff going out. And people share, and it is a fact. Okay? The other day I was at home, and my wife tells me, "Why was [a well-known news personality] fired? And I'm like, "Who told you she was fired?" She told me it

was on social media. She's been fired. So I call a guy there and the guy tells me, "she's actually coming up on news." [laughs]. So I even told [his wife] "social media, you can't trust it." So I think why people are cautious about getting stuff from people is because you still have to verify. Because you can actually mislead the public ... At the back of our minds, we know we need to be careful with what comes through these platforms. (Head of the newsroom interview)

Audiences had acquired power in the actor-network through the role they played in informing the conceptualizing, packaging and pushing of stories. However, unlike audiences in other geographical contexts (Beckett 2010), the station's audiences were not trusted enough to be incorporated in journalistic practice as co-creators of content. One interviewee explained the reasoning behind this: the negative attitude towards user-generated content was also informed by the news media context where historically, the news media had previously been used to spread misinformation (Nyamnjoh 2005) and there were negative attitudes towards the derogatorily named "gutter press" (Mwita 2021, 17) and anecdotal reports of individuals used to malign reputations or spread rumours on social media (Madowo 2015). There was therefore a mistrust of audiences as co-producers of journalistic practice, even as they contributed to other parts of news production.

The reasons as to why UGC was not published or accepted at the radio station revealed a mistrust in a non-traditional actor—the audience/user—who had otherwise been accepted in journalism practice in other contexts (Beckett 2010).

There were instances where two technological actants—servers and web metrics—were mistrusted in the actor-network. The station invested in web hosting services outside of the country, a deliberate location choice related to the expensive nature of infrastructure provision within the country, as well as a lack of trust in local ability to ensure consistent and stable service. The lead web developer provided this explanation:

Since 2012, or before that, we've been moving servers every year as the site grows. [Web hosting companies in Kenya] are there. But you don't want to risk any downtime. And of course here, it would be quite expensive. We host in Canada. We had [the Unite] States, then we came to Britain, then Britain again. Now we're in Canada... (Lead developer interview.)

For web metrics, there was widespread acceptance of their veracity and credibility within the actor-network. Reporters used web metrics to evaluate the performance of their stories on the website and on social media. Metrics included number of page views on a story, or how audiences responded to a story on the reporters' or station social media accounts, or even made comments or shared content on their own (audiences) social media networks. Web metrics were treated as a neutral measure of audience engagement with stories, or as an objective tool to validate journalists' sense of professional pride, and make decisions on the framing and placement of stories on the company website and social media accounts.

Yet there was an instance where the credibility of two news companies' web metrics was questioned, where it was considered plausible for a company to manipulate its figures. In this case, web metrics were seen to be subjective and open to manipulation, yet in other instances they were an objective measure such as of the number of social media followers, number of people who have liked or shared a story, etc.

The questioning of the accuracy of web metrics revealed that technology was largely treated as an “objective actant” until the social dimension in which it was used—in Kenya’s case, there was a history of untrustworthy news sources in the media landscape—was invoked, transforming technology into a “subjectively trustworthy” actant (Nyamnjoh 2005; Mwita 2021).

New entrants in journalistic practice demonstrate value to gain trusted entry in the actor-network.

New social and technological actors had entered the actor-network of journalistic practice at the station under study. For the most part, technological actants were accepted within the actor-network as valuable tools in news gathering, packaging and distribution. WhatsApp, for instance, had been fully adopted into news production routines and practices, becoming a frequent substitute for the morning news meeting, replacing the docket book (a manually recorded document showing the daily news assignments) and enabling rapid communication and transfer of stories from remote locations. A mobile-based application now also available on the web, WhatsApp had increased the speed and volume of news production, allowed direct engagement with sources and audiences and enabled an alternative mode of news distribution.

However, not every new social actant enjoyed the same widespread acceptance in the actor-network. The webmaster often discussed with the newsroom editors the performance of the news stories based on social media and website metrics. His technical knowledge and mastery of web metrics were a form of expertise that granted him a form of influence in the newsroom, but he did not have the same success when he continually pitched story ideas to the same editors, in an effort to negotiate access into the news production process. On one occasion he described his efforts to influence the types of stories being published as “guerilla tactics”. But in the “digital space”, which was looser and less hierarchical compared to the newsroom, the webmaster’s ideas and guidance for the lifestyle and entertainment sections of the website were frequently adopted. In the two distinct spaces—newsroom and “digital”—the acceptance of non-traditional social actors into the actor-network varied depending on the value ascribed to their contributions.

Trust engendered at institutional level needs acceptance at individual level

Trust could be engendered at institutional level (such as the owner’s insistence that all personnel in the organization use social media), but also had to be adopted at individual level (e.g. how quickly and extensively an individual reporter or editor chose to use the technologies) for the actant to be fully accepted and trusted in journalistic practice. During the period of observation, for example, several participants indicated that the initial use of the technologies, e.g. having a Twitter account, was not widely adopted and was resisted in some cases. It took the owner’s persuasion and repeated emphasis on using the technologies for some personnel to eventually acquire social media accounts.

The social media account—the company’s or the individual human actants’—would then become a trusted actant within journalistic practice. It enabled the promotion of content, the encouragement of audiences to share in distributing the content to their own social networks, the development of credibility for the company and individuals

as trustworthy news brands and sites of experimentation with different forms of content (such as videos on Facebook Live).

The findings showed that trust was not limited to a relationship between individuals but also extended to the interactions between human actants and the technological artefacts they used. The social context in which the technological artefacts were used was found to have a bearing on perceptions of their reliability and stability, and to raise queries over the veracity of web metrics. Trust—although not always explicitly named—therefore emerged as an important construct in various aspects of journalistic labour at the radio station under study.

The construct of “trust” was interpreted in this study to include the terms “credibility” and “authenticity”. In the context of journalistic practice in a digitally disrupted newsroom, trust was defined as human beings’ expectancy of virtuous conduct from other human beings, and of veracity and reliability from material or other artefacts.

Discussion and conclusion

The actor-network approach allows an unpacking of the “black box” of journalistic practice by enabling the individual examination of social actions which are typically aggregated (Othman 2019). At the station under study, pre-digital journalistic practice revolved around sources, newsroom personnel (editors, reporters and newsreaders) and audiences.

The owner’s 2006 decision to enrol the web more fully into company operations triggered a series of events that culminated in the formation of a post-digital newsroom which generated multiplatform content from two distinct spatial locations. Each of these had a particular organizational culture with the newsroom retaining the formal top-down hierarchical interaction familiar to legacy media institutions, while the digital space had an adhocratic/flat structure where social actors interacted informally as peers. Within the two spaces, the actor-network of journalistic practice exhibited the following characteristics in relation to trust: it occurred within an established routinized process; it was enacted within a particular media context; new entrants in journalistic practice demonstrated value to gain trusted entry in the actor-network; and trust engendered at institutional level needed acceptance at individual level.

The web became a second news platform, and audiences acquired a new importance, because their interests and responses to stories were made available by web metrics. The various actants contributed towards content and revenue generation, supported by a technological infrastructure. These contributions revealed a tangible value to the actor-network that led to their becoming black-boxed in aspects of journalistic practice.

With the entry of the digital technologies in the actor-network, particular mediators—the owner, webmaster, audiences and the web—joined the editors as primary actants in journalistic practice. Who defined news and how they defined it had expanded beyond the newsroom to include new actants, such as the webmaster, whose involvement came from his evaluation of audience interaction with content.

The varied digital technologies had contributed to an increase in the number of actants engaged in journalistic practice. However ANT exposed the various types of actors—insider/outsider, core/peripheral, stranger/entrenched member—described in literature (Chua and Duffy 2019; Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018; Tandoc, Jr. 2019; Wahutu 2019)

to be fluid rather than fixed, and was dependent not only on the particular actant's value to the actor-network but also on the organizational culture in which the actant operated.

For instance, the radio station's webmaster presented different types of value in the actor-network. For the hierarchical newsroom, he provided web metrics which the editors used to make decisions related to the assigning of stories and their posting on digital platforms. But despite his self-described "guerilla tactics", his efforts to contribute to the newsroom story budget had not yielded much fruit by the time of data collection. He was not a fully trusted member of the newsroom's journalistic practice.

However, in the adhocratic digital space, he was a central figure who not only provided web metrics but also conceptualized and discussed stories with the editors. He was an "outsider"/peripheral actor in the newsroom, trusted only for a particular aspect of journalistic practice (audience engagement), but an "insider"/core actor in the digital space, trusted in all aspects of journalistic practice undertaken there.

This indicates that non-traditional actors who may be deemed "peripheral" or "outsider" as they are enrolled into the actor-network can (eventually) become accepted and trusted actants in an actor-network, leading to their being black-boxed into the journalistic practice. Thus trust in the context of the actor-network of journalistic practice referred to human beings' expectancy of virtuous conduct from other human beings and of veracity and reliability from technological or other artefacts.

One observation that stood out was the caution with which user-generated content was viewed at the station. Literature from within the Kenyan mediascape had shown its uptake (Nyabuga and Booker 2013; Sambuli 2015). However, it was not a genre applied in the newsroom under study, principally because users/audiences remained consumers of news, rather than trusted contributors to the production of news. Historically, the entry of new social actors in pre-digital journalistic practice had been viewed with suspicion, as the head of the news department indicated. Thus the larger media environment in which a newsroom actor-network operated could contribute to the enrolment of a particular actant.

As Wiard (2019) noted, the legacy/traditional newsroom remains an obligatory point of passage to enable audiences acquiring information. This was visible at the station under study where the social and technological actants engaged in journalistic practice produced a voluminous amount of news content for multiple platforms. The actants collaborated in routine tasks and provided particular tangible value to the actor-network thus entrenching their trustworthiness and that of the news products they created.

Organizational (sub-)culture also appears to contribute to the acceptance and trust placed in a particular actant. The hierarchical space had entrenched routines and trusted roles where the editors, reporters and newsreader had pre-defined roles, which remained in place even with the additional practices and routines that merged with the entry of digital technologies. The news products created in this space followed standardized production practices with the digital media administrator role added to enable distribution on social media platforms. The digital media administrator played no other role in the newsroom hierarchy, however, as journalistic practice remained in the hands of traditional actors.

In the digital space, experimentation was encouraged and one new genre—short mobile lifestyle videos that were posted on a weekly basis—had acquired audience popularity, visible in the metrics and in the growing amount of advertiser revenues they

generated. The editors, webmaster and other digital staff (web developers and designer) collaborated more closely on the conceptualization, packaging and distribution of this content.

The relationship between organizational culture and innovation has been established in scholarship (Naranjo-Valencia, Jiménez-Jiménez, and Sanz-Valle 2011), but the relationship between organizational culture and trust among actors in journalistic practice would need further exploration.

Other future lines of inquiry can apply ANT with other approaches in assessing norms and ethics in journalism's adoption and use of fast-changing technologies. Much of the newsroom-centred research has also focused on well-resourced commercial media houses whose profit drives their exploration to accommodate newer technologies in order to build audiences and expand their revenue sources. There is room, therefore, for studies that assess the trust constructs in non-profit newsroom actor-networks, and the factors that animate these newsrooms' incorporation of particular social and technological actors in their journalistic practice.

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