

Chapter 4

Media–Invented Stories and Outright Lies a Threat to Journalism Ethics and Media Credibility

Agnes Lucy Lando
Daystar University, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Several authors have researched on diverse challenges affecting media practice in different parts of the world: the growing influence of bribery (Dirbaba, 2010), one-sided and distorted reporting (Mfumbusa, 2008), pornographic and oversexed content, an inclination to acceptance of the brown envelope (Kasoma, 2010; Skjerdal, 2010; White, 2011; Nwabueze, 2010), and the disconnect between media training and practice (Lando, 2013). But with ICT, contemporary challenges include sources of news. With the aid of modern technology, a story that has appeared in one media house or platform can be reproduce in another without the reproducing journalist citing the previous source, and without disclosing to audiences that the story being presented is not original. Further, some journalists have presented stories that only exist in their fantasy. All these are cases of media lies. This chapter examines select cases of media lies and the ethical and credibility threat they pose to journalism.

INTRODUCTION

On 23rd October 2014, the newspaper with the largest circulation in Kenya, also generally considered most credible, The Daily Nation, carried a unique photo story on the front page. The story indicated that a cow from Chepkeche in Uasin Gishu County was allowing two little lambs feed on her milk after the mother of the lambs wondered off in search of green pastures (Awiti, 2014). Noticing the unique fur on the lambs, a bizarre feature for lambs in that part of Kenya, readers quickly brought it to the attention of others that the newspaper had lifted the picture and caption from a website. The occurrence had actually taken place in New Zealand and not Kenya and the story had been reported on 21st June 2014 in New

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Zealand (Bletchly, 2014). Whereas major parts of the story (the incidence) are correct, changing the location to Kenya and attributing the coverage to himself was a misconduct on the part of the journalist. The presented story is partly plagiarized and partly *cooked*.

This is not the only newspaper in Kenya that has *lifted* a story from a different source and presented it as their own. Other media practitioners have, for example, created a full story out of their imagination (Elbagir, 2013). Further, this is not a Kenyan problem, but a challenge that reputable media practitioners and media houses are involved in, worldwide. World famous news media, such as CNN, is an example where the media and media practitioners have created realities to portray what is not the case. This includes, but not limited to, generating non-existing content and presenting it as a factual occurrence. That is, media *creating* news and stories purely based on the imagination of the particular journalist. For instance, during the build up to the 2013 General Elections in Kenya, CNN carried an exclusive story that private armies/gang groups in Kenya were already being recruited and organizing themselves ready to fight. They referred to this as Post-Election Violence (PEV) in the making. The CNN story depicted Kenya as preparing for war ahead of the 3rd March 2013 General Elections (Elbagir, 2013). The video clip titled “Kenyans armed and ready to vote” was uploaded on the CNN website and broadcast a few days before the General Elections. The clip featured four people whose faces were beclouded carrying what the CNN reporter Nima Elbagir described as “guns fashioned from iron piping, home-made swords and bullets bought from the black-market”. This was followed by a social media campaign by Kenyans with the #tag, *someonetell CNN*. Eventually CNN apologized.

Such kind of practice would be excused of the gutter press or citizen journalism whose practitioners have had little or no formal training at all on professional communication and media ethics. The questions that this practice raises are numerous, for example, why do trusted mainstream media choose to lie to their audiences? Surrounded by ICT world that is full of information that is just a click away, and thus tempting to google, copy and paste, how can media practitioners remain faithful to their special and unique profession and vocation? This is especially important because many persons still believe in the traditional print (newspapers) and electronic media (radio and TV) as credible news sources. When these present a view that is not accurate, what harm can they cause to the society? And to what extent do they taint the name/image of media practitioners, specifically those not involved in the practice? In this researcher’s view, both plagiarized and cooked stories are media lies.

By examining select-cases of media lies, this chapter intends to highlight stories from the print and electronic media that have been presented by media houses as their own stories when the contrary is the case; or where a media practitioner has *cooked* up a story when that story does not actually exist. This reflection paper covers the malpractice of journalists – of fabricated and / or plagiarized stories.

Methodological Approach and Theory

This study employs content analysis where the author examines a number of stories that have been *cooked* by media practitioners and houses, or copied and pasted from varied sources, and the implication therein. Interpersonal deception theory helps explain why mainstream media tell lies on their stories. According to Littlejohn (1999, p. 146), the source attempts to manipulate a message so as to be untruthful, “which may cause them apprehension concerning their false communication being detected. Simultaneously, communication receivers try to unveil or detect the validity of that information, causing suspicion about whether or not the sender is being deceitful.” The process usually starts off when a sender’s expectations, goals, prior knowledge and skill set all combine and result in a communication that is true or not

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