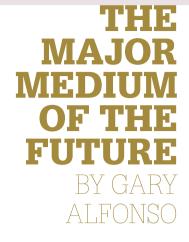# PARTICIPATORY
journalism

THE MAJOR MEDIUM OF THE FUTURE
BY GARY ALFONSO

The suspected terror-driven explosion in Moi Avenue in late May of 2012 in Nairobi perhaps best illustrated the difference between new and traditional media in Africa, and why social media will be the only media of the future, or at least the major part of every media business.

News reporters were on the scene within an hour. Within the same time, more than 1 000 pictures, clips and messages had been posted on to social pages, websites and in global chat forums. The citizen journalist not only stole the reporter's lunch, but he gave the world multiple unedited versions of events as they were unfolding. In the country's biggest newspaper, the *Daily Nation*, columnist Charles Onyango-Obbo wrote that the internet, the mobile phone and social media have become the new guerrilla weapons of the masses.

At the foothills of Mount Kenya, the second highest peak in Africa and the highest point on earth on the equator, Ernest Waititu is using the same human behaviour to change the way the world views the place where he grew up. He's helping a young health worker from the Masai community send a low-resolution photograph to a computer server run by independent journalists 200 kilometres away. In the Nairobi city centre the picture and the brief but descriptive text,

is converted into a website story of the battle to get proper sanitation and more toilets into rural Kenya, a move that could radically reduce child absenteeism at primary schools.

It's all part of K-HUG, an initiative kick-started by Internews in Kenya, a non-profit organisation that's quietly, but effectively, been going about changing the quality of journalism and media reporting in East Africa for the past 10 years.

"K-HUG brings together two aspects of everyday Kenyan life that really need to be highlighted," says Ernest Waititu, who is also a journalism trainer at Internews.

"Poor health facilities and poor access to information are two realities of Kenya's social fibre and we want to positively influence and change that by establishing a credible 'user generated' network of community journalists all over the country," says Waititu.

K-HUG, which stands for Kenya Health User Generation, is an independent new media initiative kick-started by independent bloggers and freelance journalists, through the Internews office in the Nairobi CBD, to bring everyday health experiences of real people in rural Kenya into the media mainstream.

In a country which boasts the fastest-growing internet usage via mobile phones in the world, the use of cellular technology,

the internet and independent journalists to tell the story of the social challenges brought about by poor development in the health sector makes perfect sense.
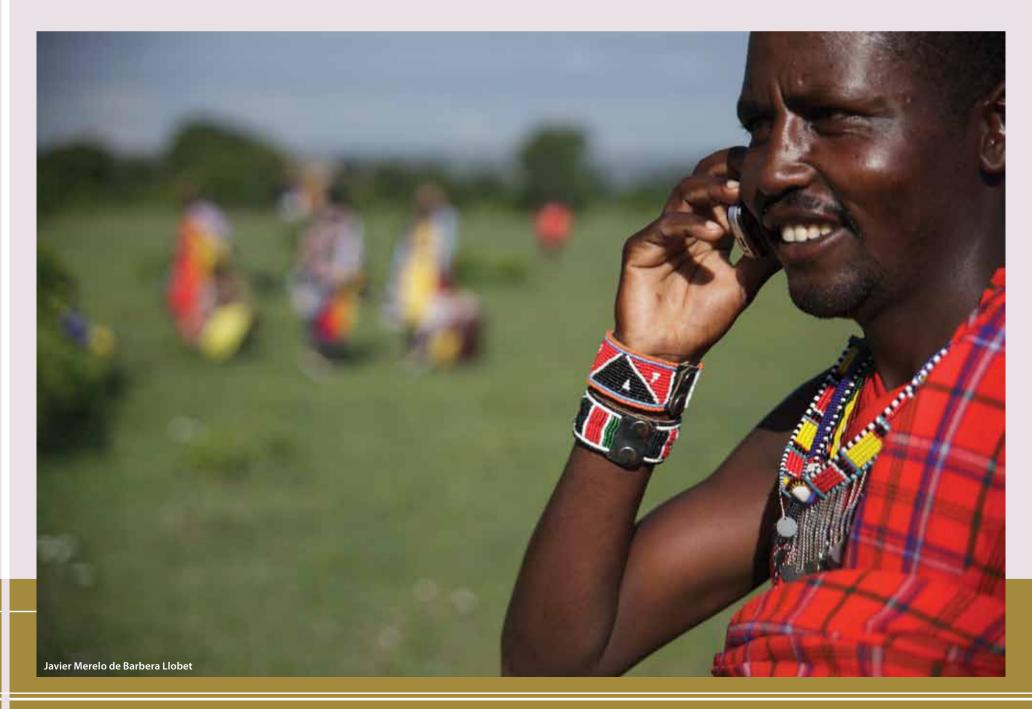
"What most people don't realise is that Kenya has almost completely leapfrogged the personal computer generation," says Paul Kubuko, the chief executive officer of the Kenya IT Board.

"There are more than 27 million mobile handsets in Kenya. Internet penetration via mobile phones has grown to almost 15 percent of the population – mostly in the last four years," says Kubuko.

The small group of independent bloggers and freelance journalists involved in running the K-HUG platform in Kenya are not entirely unaware of the pioneering work they're doing in getting the first "crowd sourcing" initiative off the ground in East Africa.

"Imagine the day 47 community reporters, or just members of the public, send you content from rural clinics, schools and small villages from all 47 counties in Kenya. The content highlighting the basic health needs of mothers and their children in small, isolated villages in remote regions such as the drought-ridden Turkana.

"Imagine the day all media organisations in Kenya can download, use or simply reference that content, as gathered and compiled by an independent

Javier Merelo de Barbera Llobet

group of journalists and bloggers, as a true, grassroots reflection of the reality on the ground.

"That day is not far off in Kenya," says Waititu.

The project involves co-operative agreements and alliances with several media groups, entrepreneurs and information entities in Kenya.

At iHub, a social media design and innovation lab in Nairobi, Jessica Colaco and a young group of designers are working around the clock to design new applications, systems and software to meet the demand in a world becoming obsessed with sharing everything from news, gossip and humour via cell phones and the internet.

The World Bank in Kenya is driving a campaign to make data available for interpretation by media and society and pursuing ways to get the message out through initiatives like the Kenya Open Data Initiative (KODI) and other public and private role players in information gathering and dissemination.

Mobile technology companies like Nokia and Samsung run innovation workshops and projects, aimed at finding young people with the solutions for a generation that leap-frogged the personal computer.

While several social media projects

or initiatives engaging ordinary citizens via mobile phones or social network in Africa can lay claim to the term "pioneering", the K-HUG initiative is unique because it is engineered to provide the content and the platform for independent journalism and public opinion to grow alongside traditional media models in a fairly mature media industry in Kenya.

"The crowd-sourcing model, or the practice of getting real-life content from people experiencing everyday challenges, or even positive stories of people making a difference and never receiving the recognition, and turning that content into digestible information for the main stream media and the public in Kenya and the rest of the world, is what makes an initiative like K-HUG so inspiring," says Ida Jooste, the country director for Internews in Kenya.

"The age of only journalists from large media organisations with expensive newspaper businesses or radio and television channels being the only source of independent information is over. Today and tomorrow belongs to the citizen journalist. The man or woman on the street has the power to communicate their own story to the world every minute of every day.

"We are simply helping independent journalists, bloggers and young people passionate about telling the unfolding story of Kenya create a platform and an outlet to do that. Other people will probably focus on the harsh hard news world of explosions and images of riots and destruction. We are engaging with main-stream media to carry more grassroots views in their reporting of the major challenges facing health, one of the major issues facing the future of East Africa, from the perspective of the people directly affected by poor health services," emphasises Jooste.

The K-HUG project has started training community journalists at rural radio stations and small community newspapers to not only feed the project with interesting content from inaccessible areas, but to also sensitise local community members to the opportunity to send content to a central hub in Nairobi, where their stories can be placed on the website set up by the group of independent reporters and bloggers.

Rose Odengo, one of the independent journalists and bloggers involved in the project, is clear about the path of communication. "Community members will send us everything from

pictures, video and text, even a recorded sound bite – via an application specially designed for our platform and the phones in use. The website will be the main body, but the social platforms will be the blood and oxygen of the platform," says Odengo.

Charles Onyango-Obbo of the Daily Nation also sums up the social media sentiment sweeping Kenya and how citizen journalism has the potential to be the protest, or celebration, of choice of ordinary Kenyans in their pursuit of justice, truth and recognition.

His column concluded with: "The good, the bad and the ugly, the heroes and the villains, now all fight on a level ground. It is stuff like this that gives digital platforms their democratic and delightfully subversive quality."

It perhaps illustrates why projects like K-HUG, innovative young people at places iHub and Internews, as well as ordinary citizens with smart phones all over Kenya are not only changing the perspectives about health challenges in the country – they're perhaps also changing the way the media industry should view information borne out of the joys and sorrows of ordinary people who want their voices heard. They now have the tools to do it.