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Between the Truth and the Brown Envelope: Reflections on Kenya's Narrative Crisis

REFLECTION PAPER

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Introduction

Every so often, the work forces you to stop, take a breath, and admit what you've really seen. Over the past year, our teams from the Open Institute and the Association of Freelance Journalists have sat in many sessions with journalists in Kilifi County, listening to their stories, their frustrations, their dreams, and the quiet courage it takes to keep telling the truth when the ground beneath you keeps shifting. Somewhere in those conversations, we realised we were sitting on something bigger than a training programme. We were sitting on a country's unfinished story about its storytellers.

This paper is our attempt to write that story down, as we have learnt it. We write it as a reflection, not a formal white paper or a policy paper. It is our attempt to document the issues we are tackling together - media resilience, investigative depth, the everyday pressures that shape county journalism. These cannot be understood from conference stages or policy reports alone. They have to be felt, witnessed, and lived. And we did live them: inside workshops that stretched long past their scheduled ending; during tea breaks where the most honest truths surfaced; in whispered conversations about safety; in jokes that masked exhaustion; and in moments of brilliance from reporters who simply needed a space that believed in them.

Along the way, we were reminded that people who often have far less than the country demands of them hold journalism in Kenya together. People who chase stories on empty stomachs. People who have to weigh truth against rent. People who negotiate with power in the afternoon and edit their children's homework at night. And yet, they keep showing up. They keep telling the stories that would otherwise drown in silence. They insist their communities deserve better.

We want to thank the journalists we worked with at Maono Space. You gave this paper its substance. You gave it its heart. You challenged us, surprised us, humbled us, and occasionally made us laugh when you probably shouldn't have. You allowed us into your professional and personal worlds with honesty and vulnerability. This reflection is as much yours as it is ours.

Our aim here is simple: to add something useful to the wider thinking about journalism in Kenya. To speak plainly about the forces eroding investigative reporting. To show how these forces touch everything—human rights, livelihoods, civic agency, the integrity of public knowledge. To remind the industry that resilience is built not by slogans, but by paying attention to the lived reality of those who carry the craft. Most importantly, we want to show some of the impediments that obstruct the revolution of Kenyan self-narratives. We don't offer a manifesto. We offer perspective. We offer stories. We offer the clarity that comes from sitting with a problem long enough to see its shape.

And we offer this paper to anyone who cares about the future of journalism, not as observers but as people who recognise that a country's imagination depends on its storytellers.

Journalism On The Edge Of A Brown Envelope

Kenyan journalism stands in a curious place. The mastheads still print, the talk shows still roar, the hashtags still trend. The industry looks remotely alive. Inside the profession, the story reads very differently. Reporters are leaving newsrooms in thousands, desks sit empty, the workforce stretched thin and the people who still carry a notebook and microphone through the country now walk a tightrope stretched between dignity and hunger.

Last year alone, over 10,000 media jobs disappeared. Those jobs carried salaries, basic benefits, medical cover and some kind of institutional cover. They anchored families and neighbourhoods. Their disappearance did not create a vacuum for robots or AI. It was a freelance scramble. Editors now expect freelance journalists to fill the gap at a fraction of the cost and with none of the security. The professional title remained. Their professional life changed completely.

The new going rate for a story in many outlets sits around KES 1,500. A journalist in Kilifi laid out the maths with the simplicity of someone who has repeated the explanation too many times. Transport to a distant village, a few cups of tea for sources, phone calls, a day or two of time, and the risk of annoying influential people all add up to several times that amount. One of them told us about a story that cost KES 15,000 to do properly. The newspaper paid KES 3,000 and then reduced the piece to under 500 words to make room for the usual political dance. The story still lives in their memory. The motivation does not.

In this economic landscape, the brown envelope steps forward as the real commissioning editor.

The Brown Envelope As a Business Model

The phrase “brown envelope journalism” often appears in moral language. Commentators describe it as corruption, bribery, or ethical collapse. Those words satisfy a particular appetite for judgment. They rarely improve understanding. A journalist in Kilifi does not wake up and choose a moral philosophy. They wake up and decide whether their children eat.

During the recent Magarini by-election, we sat with a group of reporters. They all knew the candidates' schedules better than any campaign manager. They track the governor, the MP, the senator, the women representative, their rivals, and the various aspirants who orbit them. They do not do this to follow issues. They do it to follow envelopes.

The envelope is a bit different from transport. The brown envelope is what is given for the story to appear and it ranges. It can be used to kill a story. The fare is about facilitation to get to the event.

The brown envelope is bribery and it is meant to influence how you package the story and also the brown envelope can be used to kill a story or make the story disappear.

To organise a single press conference in Kilifi, organisers routinely budget between KES 25,000 and KES 60,000 purely for “media facilitation”. That money does not fund content. It funds presence. A room with twenty journalists, each expecting an envelope after the event, becomes a predictable cost of doing politics. A journalist summarised it cleanly during one of our trainings:

> “You can make even KES 5,000 in one day just for being seen. If they know the story runs, you will start getting extra. The client writes the story, you just push it.”

This sentence captures the economy better than any academic paper. The brown envelope now acts as an assignment desk, travel allowance, and risk compensation in one move. The client finances the coverage, provides the angle, and often drafts the “story”. The journalist becomes a courier, amplifier, and costume for legitimacy.

This arrangement harms the craft and the public interest. It also keeps supper on the table. Any serious conversation about media integrity in Kenya must begin from that tension.

The Silent Rewrite Of The Social Contract

Journalism once sat in a social contract with the public. The press claimed a mandate to observe, question, and explain society to itself. Viewers demanded a right to know. Advertisers, donors, and political actors all crowded into this space, and the relationship was still held in some form. The reader or listener believed that the person with the notebook worked on their behalf.

That belief erodes each time a press conference runs as news rather than as paid content. It weakens with every half-page “exclusive” that reads like a government ministry press release. It dissolves when communities remember that the last time a journalist came to their village was when a politician visited and handed out branded sugar.

In Kilifi, audiences now assume politics sits behind most coverage. That assumption is rational. Journalists themselves confirm that much of their time goes into events commissioned by political and business interests. The public begins to treat journalism as a branch of public relations. The reporter becomes a familiar face in the crowd, no longer a chronicler of community life, but simply part of the entourage.

The brown envelope pays for more than a day’s work. It rewires the storyteller's loyalties. An editor in Nairobi still exists somewhere at the end of the pipeline with the person who pays today’s fare and buys today’s lunch commands more immediate allegiance.

The Price Of Silence On “Small” Stories

Every shilling that flows through the brown envelope system carries an opportunity cost. A journalist who spends an afternoon covering yet another launch, rally, or a cheque-handover does not spend that time on the quiet stories that define real life. The missed work rarely appears on air or in print, so the loss hides easily.

The stories left untold accumulate in specific ways:

- The woman who finally owns her land after years of quiet struggle.
- The youth group that organises itself to clean a river and create jobs along the way.
- The community that negotiates its own rules around sand harvesting or fishing grounds.
- The school that experiments with a new way of involving parents in learning.

Each of these stories challenges some long-standing belief. They show citizens as agents of change. They hint that development can emerge from community initiative rather than donor projects. They demonstrate that leadership does not belong exclusively to the wealthy. When these stories never surface, the old phrases remain unchallenged:

“Donors must do development.”
“Politicians must give something for votes.”
“A poor person cannot make a good politician.”
“If you want something done, you need to know someone and have some chai ready.”

These lines travel easily in conversations, churches, boda stages, and market stalls. They bear the weight of repetition. They become a form of civic common sense. Journalism has always acted as a counterweight to such fatalism. When investigative work disappears, and event-driven coverage dominates, those phrases gain even more authority.

The brown envelope does not simply distort stories. It chokes off the stories that might rewire a community's thinking about power, rights, and possibility.

The Gendered Edge Of Risk

For women journalists, the costs of this economy appear in sharper relief. Many of the most critical stories in coastal Kenya sit in areas that carry real physical risk: land conflicts, minerals, criminal networks, localised corruption, and gender-based violence. These beats endanger any reporter. For women, the risk is higher.

One woman journalist explained the calculus:

> "Some of these stories are dangerous, especially for us women to research and do. We have to partner with a male journalist or have a man go with you to research the story properly. Even then, your security is not guaranteed. Some of the stories here in Kilifi around minerals and land rights can get you killed."

She then described a case that lingers in the local journalistic memory:

> "Just the other day, a lady journalist was raped and severely beaten by five men for trying to tell a story in which a minister was mentioned. We have safe spaces like Maono to write, but what about the research? And then the story is published, and nothing happens. Eventually, you despair and go back to the politics and business stories because they are safe and you get paid."

The keyword here is "eventually". A woman does not abandon investigative work after a single bad day. She accumulates experiences in which risk and trauma meet indifference. Safety during writing sessions in a place like Maono offers some protection and a sense of solidarity. The field remains an open field. The decision to retreat to safer paid assignments grows as a rational response to a hostile environment.

This gendered dimension of brown envelope economics deserves serious attention. A system that rewards attendance at political rallies and exposes women to danger when they pursue sensitive stories will naturally produce fewer female voices in public-interest journalism. The stories that vanish include those that address women's lived realities most directly.

The New Identity Of The Journalist

In conversations across Kilifi, another pattern emerges. Journalists resist the narrative of moral failure. They describe themselves with humour, resignation, and a particular stubborn pride. Many introduce themselves as "hustlers with a camera" or "press people trying to survive". The professional label remains. The core identity now sits closer to the wider Kenyan hustle.

This identity carries consequences. A hustler maximises income across multiple streams. The political rally in the morning, the paid corporate event in the afternoon, a sponsored social media post in the evening, and, on a good day, a genuine community story. In that mix, editorial independence becomes something to negotiate on a case-by-case basis.

The editor's role also shifts. Many Nairobi desks no longer set the day's agenda. They receive content from the field and decide what to cut, combine, or discard. The real agenda-setting moves upstream

to the people who fund the events and envelopes. The political class and local elites understand this dynamic well. They invest in presence. They invest in spectacle. They invest in visibility. They know the journalist's presence almost guarantees some form of amplification.

A white paper on this reality cannot treat journalists as passive victims. They participate in the system, improvise within it, and sometimes exploit it. At the same time, any serious critique must acknowledge that an individual standing before rent, school fees, transport, and food faces a stark menu of options. Moral lectures feel very cheap beside an empty fridge.

Why This Moment Matters

Kenya has lived with brown envelopes for decades. The practice feels almost traditional. Many older journalists recount stories of envelopes passed in hotel corridors since the Moi era. Something new sits inside the current moment. The scale of newsroom collapse, the depth of freelance precarity, and the speed of political messaging all raise the stakes.

A system where a few brown envelopes supplement a salary carries one level of risk. A system where envelopes act as the primary business model for entire counties carries another. In the first system, envelopes distort coverage at the margins. In the second, they become the organising principle for who gets covered, how, and when.

This white paper takes the view that the brown envelope has become a structural feature of Kenyan journalism. It shapes how journalists move, whom they follow, what they write, and what they cannot afford to touch. It shapes the kinds of stories citizens hear. It shapes the expectations communities have about power and justice. It shapes the safety of women entering the profession.

Journalistic integrity, though challenging to uphold, is actively championed by certain media organizations that strictly oppose the "brown envelope" practice. These newsrooms mandate that staff declare any gifts, urging journalists to reject cash inducements. While this ethical stance is the less common choice, it ultimately yields professional fulfillment. It is crucial to acknowledge that many principled journalists continue to navigate financial difficulties without compromising their integrity.

That scale of influence demands more than moral irritation. It calls for a deep redesign of how Kenya imagines journalism, funds it, and protects the people who practise it.

The Substance and Structure of a Media Economy Under Strain

Kenya's media economy is reorganizing with a clarity that demands serious study. Beyond the daily struggles of individual journalists lies a deeper arrangement of forces economic, political, technological, and cultural that collectively define the ecosystem in which truth is produced. This chapter maps that architecture with the sobriety it deserves. It speaks not of personal hardship, but of the systemic logic that shapes what journalism becomes when the scaffolding that once held it upright is quietly removed.

The first layer of this structure sits in the country's economic realignment. Kenya's media institutions expanded during a period when advertising revenue was plentiful, donor-funded projects layered on additional capacity, and the political class maintained a predictable relationship with the press.

Those pillars no longer exist in their old form. Advertising has migrated to global digital platforms; newsroom budgets have thinned to the bone; and donor interventions remain episodic, transactional, and often indifferent to long-term sustainability. What remains is a media economy held together by fragmented revenue streams and by individuals improvising in the face of uncertainty.

This economic realignment reshaped the profession from within. Journalists once operated within identifiable institutions: newspapers with their sub-editors and seasoned desks, radio houses with their dependable rhythms, and television stations with their layered editorial checks. The newsroom anchored the work. Today, that anchor has lifted.

The modern Kenyan journalist operates as a contractor in a marketplace governed by algorithms, political patrons, and the unforgiving arithmetic of freelance survival. The institutional buffers that once absorbed political pressure or protected journalists from retaliation have thinned. The new arrangement positions the journalist closer to power, but unprotected. This proximity carries consequences for how stories are chosen, how facts are negotiated, and how truth is weighed in an economy with no safety nets.

Another layer of Kenya's media structure emerges in the political economy of counties. Devolution multiplied the centres of power, but it also intensified the dependency of journalists on the political and business elites who dominate local economies. County governments became major advertisers and agenda-setters.

Their budgets determine which stories are amplified, which ones are ignored, and how long a narrative remains in circulation. The advertising logic that once sat in Nairobi now diffuses into counties where relationships, proximity, and personal loyalty hold more weight than institutional safeguards.

A County like Kilifi reveals this configuration vividly. Its media ecosystem is not merely underfunded; it is structurally tied to the rhythms of local politics. Budget cycles, campaign seasons, contractor networks, and patronage lines shape the flow of resources. Media becomes an extension of this civic choreography. When the economy rewards the appearance of coverage rather than the craft of inquiry, the system reinforces itself through repetition.

A political event attracts visibility, visibility attracts journalists, journalists amplify, amplification validates the event's importance, and the cycle continues. The story that required patience, moral courage, and rigorous investigation receives no comparable reinforcement. The structure rewards one form of journalism and leaves the other unfunded.

Technology adds another dimension. The shift to digital consumption should have expanded the public sphere. Instead, it created a new pressure: the tyranny of immediacy. Editors now chase the velocity of social media, not the depth of civic importance. Journalists feel this pressure acutely. When newsrooms measure value through clicks, impressions, and virality, the reporter becomes a supplier in a fast-moving market rather than a curator of public wisdom. The logic of the digital economy prizes volume over nuance, visibility over substance, and circulation over scrutiny. It rewards those who can produce quickly, cheaply, and frequently, and it undermines work that requires time, travel, or danger. This is no moral judgment; it is a structural truth.

The donor ecosystem is another part of architecture. Donor-funded journalism initiatives proliferate across the continent, yet many operate in cycles that prioritise short-term projects over long-term stability. Grants reward novelty, innovation, and one-off investigations. Few invest in the slow, unglamorous work of building newsroom infrastructure, editorial mentorship, safety systems, or steady income streams for county correspondents. In the absence of such foundational investments, donor programmes become seasonal rains that are welcome when they arrive, gone before the roots deepen. A media economy cannot grow when its rains are unpredictable.

The final structural layer lies in Kenya's information ecology. Counties hold vast amounts of public data including budgets, contracts, land records, procurement documents that rarely circulate in accessible or timely ways. When information is opaque, the journalist becomes dependent on insiders for access. Insiders seldom give information without expecting a return. The structure, therefore, produces a dependency chain: the journalist depends on the insider, the insider depends

on political interests, and the story depends on the conditions of this relationship. Dependency shapes narrative. Narrative shapes public imagination.

Together, these forces create a media economy where survival shapes production, where proximity shapes truth, and where political incentives sit closer to the reporter than institutional ones. This is not a collapse; it is a reorganisation. Kenya is not losing journalism; it is reinventing it within the constraints of its economy. The current setup reveals more about the country than occupation. It reveals how power circulates, how communities value information, and how institutions respond to scarcity.

To understand Kenya's media economy today is to understand how truth is financed. It is to recognise that narratives do not emerge in a vacuum; they emerge in a market. And in every market, price signals shape behaviour. When the price of survival is higher than the price of truth, survival prevails. When the system rewards speed over scrutiny, speed becomes craft. When political actors hold the most reliable budgets, political stories dominate the airwaves. These patterns do not point to moral decay; they point to structural incentives.

A society receives the stories it chooses to fund. Kenya funds political visibility. Kenya underfunds civic inquiry. Kenya leaves public-interest storytelling to the bravery of individuals who carry risks without insurance and pursue truth without compensation. This is the architecture of the present.

The Architecture of Civic Imagination

Every society carries a story it tells itself about what is possible. This internal script is neither accidental nor evenly distributed. It is assembled slowly, unevenly from the patterns of speech, the rhythms of politics, the silences of institutions, and the narratives that travel freely because they are easier to fund than the truth. In counties like Kilifi, civic imagination takes its shape not from constitutions or manifestos but from the stories that move with velocity through markets, places of worship, boda boda ranks, WhatsApp groups, and coastal verandas. The journalist becomes an architect of this civic imagination whether they intend to or not because the stories they tell and the stories they abandon become the building blocks of public belief.

In a media economy under strain, this architecture develops a distinctive character. It privileges the visible over the consequential, the spectacular over the structural, the politically funded over the community-driven. This is not a public flaw. It is the logic of an economy where truth carries a cost and spectacle carries a budget. When journalists are compelled to choose between survival and

scrutiny, survival becomes the unspoken editor-in-chief. And survival has its own aesthetic. It demands speed, repetition and loyalty to events that pay. It becomes a **narrative economy of necessity**, and necessity shapes the civic imagination more firmly than any policy directive.

Across Kilifi, this imagination takes the form of a familiar catechism. Communities repeat inherited lines that go unchallenged because the investigative architecture that once softened their grip has thinned. People say that development flows from donors, leadership belongs to the wealthy, corruption is inevitable, favors deserve rewards, and justice waits on the goodwill of powerful patrons. These are not superstitions. They are the rational outcomes of a landscape where the stories capable of unseating such myths rarely reach the public. They are the aftershocks of a media system that cannot afford to examine its own society with the patience and depth that truth requires.

Imagination shrinks in the absence of counter-stories. When a political rally reliably appears in every bulletin, and a community victory appears only once in a while, the imagination learns that power flows from podiums rather than from citizens. When ribbon-cuttings receive front-page treatment and quiet innovations in villages remain unreported, the imagination concludes that progress is a gift rather than a right. When extractive industries operate in the shadows because the journalists who might expose them cannot afford the transport or risk, the imagination begins to normalise silence as civic virtue. And when women's experiences of violence and intimidation rarely enter the public record, the imagination internalises a hierarchy of whose suffering counts.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o often argued that the struggle for freedom begins with the struggle over narrative. The colonial state maintained its power not merely through force but through the stories it told about itself and about the African subject. Today's power operates with similar sophistication. It funds its own visibility. It curates its own mythologies. It fills the narrative space with a choreography of announcements, pledges, handouts, reconciliations, and televised benevolence. These stories become the scaffolding of civic imagination, teaching citizens to interpret governance through performance rather than substance.

In the world Kilifi's journalists inhabit, narrative becomes a currency. It moves through hands, earns loyalty, buys silence, and confers legitimacy. A politician's convoy becomes a travelling theatre within which the community witnesses its own marginalisation packaged as generosity. Every event, every handshake, every gift becomes a televised ritual that reinforces the idea that power is something bestowed rather than contested. The civic imagination absorbs this ritual with the same ease that a sponge absorbs water.

Alexis de Tocqueville once warned that the most dangerous moment for a society is when it stops expecting anything of itself. Kenya approaches this danger not through apathy but through narrative

starvation. Communities starved of investigative stories begin to rely on myths. And myths flourish in the absence of mirrors that reveal the truth of everyday life. A good investigative tale acts as a mirror; it reflects a community to itself, clarifying its strengths, exposing its contradictions, and offering pathways to collective action. When such mirrors crack or disappear, people see themselves only through the reflections prepared by those who dominate the narrative in the marketplace.

This shrinking imagination is not inevitable. It is simply the path a society takes when truth becomes expensive and propaganda becomes cheap. The civic imagination always seeks content. If journalism cannot supply it, politics will. If politics cannot, rumour will. If rumour cannot, fatalism will. A society deprived of complex stories begins to whisper its doubts and despair in private rather than challenge them publicly. Complexity retreats; resignation advances.

Yet, even within this fragile terrain, the possibility of narrative restoration exists. Communities still carry quiet stories of resilience, innovation, and resistance that challenge the fatalistic script. The mother in Ganze who organises her neighbours to build a water point. The youth cooperative in Vitengeni that builds new livelihoods out of abandoned land. The teachers who experiment with community-led accountability in schools. These stories, when told with care, broaden the horizon of what communities can imagine for themselves.

Public imagination grows when it meets evidence of its own capacity. It strengthens when stories reveal agency rather than dependency. It thrives when journalists illuminate the ingenuity of everyday people. The crisis in Kenya's media ecosystem, therefore, becomes more than an economic concern, it becomes a crisis of civic imagination.

> A society that cannot see itself clearly begins to shrink.
> A society that sees itself only through the eyes of its politicians begins to believe that those politicians are its destiny.
> A society rediscovered through its own stories begins to awaken.

The Political Stakes of Narrative Infrastructure

Every political system rests on a foundation more subtle than constitutions, security agencies, manifestos, or electoral cycles. It rests on the **narrative infrastructure** that distributed machinery through which a society interprets itself, names its problems, identifies its villains, imagines its alternatives, and remembers its victories. When narrative infrastructure weakens, power becomes unexamined, injustice becomes routineised, and possibility becomes a rumour. When it strengthens, communities rediscover their capacity to act, organise, demand, and dream.

Kenya stands at a moment where narrative infrastructure has thinned to a dangerous degree. The county became the stage through which citizens expected devolution to deliver dignity, representation, and development. Yet the county also became the level where political patronage is most intimate, information is most opaque, and the media economy is most fragile. Within this vacuum, the stories that dominate public consciousness no longer emerge from scrutiny or civic purpose; they emerge from whoever has the liquidity to fund their circulation.

This transformation has political implications beyond journalism. It alters how communities encounter the state. It determines whose voices survive the noise. It shapes the scale of ambition that young people allow themselves. And it affects the resilience of democracy itself not in the procedural sense, but in the deeper sense of whether citizens believe they have standing in their own country.

Narrative infrastructure matters because the Kenyan state exercises its authority not only through law, but through plausibility. If the public imagines that political promises are normal currency, then political patronage becomes governance. If the public imagines that development is an act of generosity rather than obligation, then the social contract tilts in favour of those who perform benevolence most theatrically. If the public imagines that corruption is the inevitable price of progress, then scrutiny becomes excess, and accountability becomes noise.

A society accepts what it imagines.
A society resists what it imagines.
A society transforms what it imagines.

Narrative infrastructure mediates this imagination.

In the absence of a robust media economy, Kenya risks entering what Achille Mbembe describes as a “narrative captivity” a condition where political actors monopolise the space of meaning-making. In counties like Kilifi, this captivity is subtle, polite, and efficient. It arrives through repeated events, polished speeches, strategic handouts, and well-coordinated media escorts. It presents politics as

theatre, and the journalist as a stagehand. It turns governance into an unending performance of activity rather than accountability.

This choreography is politically effective because it feels familiar. It draws on cultural expectations of patronage and respect for elders, and it adapts them to the contemporary vocabulary of development. The governor becomes the benevolent patriarch; the politician becomes the custodian of opportunity; the journalist becomes an amplifier of this paternal script. This continuity arrests the imagination at the dependency level. Communities begin to seek answers, not within. They wait for solutions instead of initiating them. They negotiate with power rather than claiming it.

Narrative infrastructure not only shapes belief, it also shapes behaviour. We have seen how journalists, constrained by an underfunded profession, gravitate toward the events that offer immediate returns. This gravitational pull influences which stories communities encounter daily.

Over time, those stories consolidate into a worldview that privileges spectacle over substance. A citizen whose daily news diet consists of rallies, handovers, and political declarations begins to interpret leadership through the lens of presence and performance. The absence of counter-stories which are the stories of citizen action, quiet resistance, local innovation which creates an unbalanced civic diet. The mind adapts to what it is fed.

Yet counties like Kilifi are not without alternative narratives. They exist in the friction between what communities experience and what they are told. They emerge in the quiet work of women organising savings groups, in the ingenuity of youth turning idle land into livelihoods, in elders resolving conflicts through consensus, in boda riders forming unions to protect one another, in fishermen negotiating sustainable practices, and in community health volunteers filling governance gaps with invisible labour. These stories carry political meaning of another kind. They reveal a society that is not waiting for intervention, but building solutions through collective intelligence.

Without narrative infrastructure, these stories remain local knowledge. They travel orally, sometimes with humour, sometimes with resignation, sometimes with pride. They rarely reach the county or national stage. They do not shape budgets, influence priorities, or reframe political expectations. They remain powerful but contained. The political stakes of narrative infrastructure lie precisely here: **whether these stories remain hidden or whether they become public evidence of a society capable of governing itself.**

When narrative infrastructure is rebuilt, it becomes a counterweight to both fatalism and patronage. It becomes the mechanism through which the public sees the state clearly and sees itself even more clearly. It becomes the space where women's experiences enter the public record with dignity, where the poor speak without being spoken for, where youth articulate not only demands but visions, where truth becomes an act of public service rather than private courage.

Designing a New Narrative Infrastructure

A society protects its future by protecting its storytellers. When storytellers lose ground, a nation loses memory, loses courage, and loses its ability to imagine alternatives to the present. This chapter turns fully to design not in the shallow technocratic sense, but in the profound civic sense articulated by thinkers such as Amartya Sen, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Okwiri Oduor and Ali Mazrui: design as the deliberate construction of the conditions under which human beings can think, speak, and act with dignity.

Narrative infrastructure is not a metaphor. It is a system of interlocking civic technologies physical, economic, intellectual, and moral that determines whose stories survive, whose truths circulate, and whose agency becomes visible. In a county like Kilifi, building this infrastructure is not optional; it is the precondition for any democratic ambition worth defending.

Why This Matters

Recent research confirms how critically information and data ecosystems affect civic life in Kenya. For example, the Cyber Policy Centre's *Mapping of the Open Data Ecosystem in Kenya* (2021) shows that access to data at the county level (formal and informal) is shaped by power, political will and institutional design. Cyber Policy Center Similarly, the Internews *Navigating Kenya's Digital Information Ecosystem* report (2024) highlights how digital media and information flows shape civic participation and vulnerability. Information Saves Lives | Internews+1 These findings show that narrative infrastructure at the county level matters deeply not just for journalism, but for how a community understands itself and exercises agency.

A new narrative infrastructure must therefore rise from the realities of the county, not from nostalgia for national newsrooms that may never return. It must be designed with the precision of a political economist, the empathy of a community organiser, and the imagination of a novelist.

1. Place the First Technology of Freedom

Every civic transformation begins with a place. Walter Benjamin wrote that public life starts wherever people gather to think. For Kilifi's journalists, the working environment has until recently been severely constrained: many worked from home alongside other responsibilities; some relied

on restaurants or borrowed offices; internet access was unreliable; many lacked computers. These are not mere inconveniences; they shape the very possibility of storytelling.

The creation of the Maono Space media centre in Kilifi provides a tangible shift. It offers quiet rooms dedicated to writers, stable high-speed internet, access to computers and editing tools, a studio for audio work, safe spaces for women journalists, and a neutral environment free from political interference. One journalist reflected: "This is the first place where my work feels respected." Place becomes infrastructure. It becomes dignity. It becomes a possibility.

2. Continuous Craft: What a Year of Proximity Taught Us

Journalism is not simply the transmission of information; it is the ritual of understanding. That ritual grows through repeated practice, not one-off training. Over the past year, the Open Institute and AFJ worked week after week with Kilifi's journalists rewriting stories, debating angles, deepening questions, forming peer networks. Through that process we observed that skills deepen when learning is sustained, when mentorship becomes a habit, when peer critique becomes normalised.

At Maono, younger reporters absorbed structured practices: reviewing sources, linking context, asking "Why does this matter?" Editors acted as coaches, not just supervisors. Peer-review became peer-expectation. Confidence grew into competence. This confirms that narrative infrastructure must include continuous, relational mentorship and peer networks, not episodic workshops.

3. Economic Scaffolding Financing the Cost of Truth

Development scholars like Thandika Mkandawire argued that when intellectual labour is starved, societies shrink. So it is with journalism. Kilifi's journalists repeatedly made clear: the cost of investigative journalism, travel, data, equipment, time exceeds what the market pays. The KES 1,500 for a story done by a freelancer is a rate that cannot sustain meaningful journalism.

Maono's model responds by pooling equipment, sharing editing tools, planning a county-level story support fund, and coordinating field logistics. In short, narrative infrastructure must recognise that truth has a cost and provide economic scaffolding to match.

4. Safety A Civic Duty

Studies of journalists' safety emphasise that risk is not evenly distributed. Women face unique and disproportionate threats especially when reporting land, minerals, gender-based violence, or

corruption. In Kilifi, we heard stories of self-censorship, of avoidance of beats, of exits from the profession.

Maono embedded safety into its design: a dedicated safe writing space, peer accompaniment networks, private meeting rooms, and protocols for sensitive reporting. If a society cannot protect its storytellers, it forfeits its capacity to bear witness.

5. Information Access: Breaking the Chains of Dependency

Data is power. The open-data mapping by the Cyber Policy Centre shows that county-level transparency in Kenya is influenced by political will, institutional design and informal rules of access. Cyber Policy Center Without access to budgets, procurement records, land data and project documents, journalists become dependent on insiders. Dependency limits freedom, distorts truth.

Maono's next phase includes a community data library, training on public records access, partnerships with open data platforms, and support for investigative research. Narrative infrastructure must democratise knowledge as a foundation for independent storytelling.

6. Community Accountability The Baraza as Editorial Method

Ali Mazrui described African public life as "discursive republics," shaped by conversation rather than decree. Kilifi's stories sharpened when journalists actively engaged communities, youth groups, women's savings circles, fishers, and elders. Their lived voices transformed angles, added moral weight, and strengthened relevance.

Narrative infrastructure institutionalises that process: story circles, baraza-review forums, participatory story-selection, and community feedback mechanisms. It is not populism, it is rigor and rootedness.

7. Courage Infrastructure The Invisible Backbone

Courage is more than a trait; it is a system feature. Chess studies of risk in journalism show that solo reporters on difficult beats are twice as likely to avoid the story. In Kilifi, we observed that journalists pursued challenging issues when they felt supported. Maono's community of practice became that accompaniment. Narrative infrastructure, therefore, must intentionally build: shared risk networks, solidarity across beats, and collective defence of difficult stories. When storytellers feel supported, they leap into public accountability.

When these pillars converge, narrative infrastructure becomes a political force. It shifts who defines truth. It amplifies the agency of communities. It reframes power as examined rather than endured. This is not a design exercise; this is democratic restoration. It readies counties like Kilifi to reclaim their narratives, to enable their citizens to participate knowingly, and to protect their right to speak, hear, and be heard.

Citizenship as a Narrative Practice

Citizenship is often described in legal terms rights, duties, entitlements, obligations. But in lived societies, citizenship is primarily a *narrative practice*. A person becomes a citizen not when the constitution recognises them, but when they recognise themselves in the stories that circulate around them. A community becomes a political actor when it sees itself reflected in narratives of agency rather than narratives of dependency. A nation becomes democratic when its people begin to imagine themselves as protagonists rather than spectators.

This chapter turns to that proposition: **how narrative infrastructure reshapes the meaning of citizenship itself**. It argues that the crisis of journalism in Kenya is not only an economic or professional crisis; it is a civic crisis that strikes at the heart of how people understand their own power.

Citizenship Without Narrative is Citizenship Without Imagination

The Kenyan constitution promises national sovereignty. Yet sovereignty is not a material delivered by law; it is a conviction formed through repeated evidence that citizens matter. That conviction emerges only through storytelling. When stories illuminate citizen action, collective intelligence, local innovation, and the lived consequences of policy choices, people internalise a worldview in which they are the centre of public life. When stories instead focus on elite performance, personal patronage, political choreography, and transactional generosity, citizenship shrinks into spectatorship.

For years, Kilifi like many counties has lived inside a narrow narrative frame:

- Leaders as benefactors
- Citizens as receivers
- Development as charity
- Accountability as confrontation
- Politics as spectacle
- Justice as privilege

This frame is not inherent to the coast, nor to Kenya. It is a narrative outcome arising from a weakened media economy, restricted information, unsafe reporting environments, and the normalisation of the brown envelope as an economic lifeline. Where stories diminish citizens, citizenship becomes ornamental.

Narrative Infrastructure is Civic Infrastructure

A functioning democracy requires more than voting. It requires an ongoing cultural practice in which people see themselves as authors of public life. This practice depends on a narrative ecosystem that does three things:

1. **Reflects** citizens accurately.
2. **Educates** citizens about the systems that shape their lives.
3. **Provokes** citizens to imagine alternatives.

A journalist's work is therefore not merely descriptive; it is constitutive. By framing issues, interrogating power, contextualising events, and illuminating unheard voices, journalists help citizens understand their own location within the broader social and political landscape. When journalists lack tools, safety, information, or economic stability, the stories that would strengthen citizenship evaporate. What remains are power financed narratives.

The result is not apathy, it is a narrative confinement.

What We Saw in Kilifi: Citizenship Expands When Storytelling Expands

Over the past year, we observed in small but unmistakable ways how narrative restoration begins to restore citizenship.

When journalists received stable space, mentorship, and tools, they began to ask different questions - not only "What happened?" but "Who is affected?", "Who benefits?", "What are the alternatives?", "How have we been misled to think this way?", "What does the community want shared?" These questions are civil rights architecture. They invite participation rather than passive consumption.

Even before the formal story-support programme launches, we saw journalists gravitate toward human interest stories that reconfigure the public imagination:

- Why young women in Kaloleni organise around savings groups
- How farmers experiment with climate-resistant crops
- How mothers hold clinics accountable for maternal health
- How communities negotiate water access, land rights, and local justice

These are not "soft stories." They are stories that teach citizens that the centre of political life is not the podium; it is the household, the market, the village square, the cooperative, the savings group, the boda stage. Citizenship grows where citizens recognise themselves.

The Political Stakes: When Storytelling Changes, Government Changes

Power responds to narrative. A county government can ignore individual complaints; it cannot easily ignore a documented pattern. A politician can dismiss a lone protester; they cannot dismiss a story that reshapes public memory. A bureaucrat can hide a single file; they cannot hide a dataset made public. When narrative infrastructure strengthens, the behaviour of the government shifts because the cost of impunity increases.

In counties like Kilifi, where record-keeping, procurement, land governance, and resource allocation remain opaque, narrative infrastructure creates the public lens through which these systems are understood. It empowers citizens to make sense of their environment, to demand answers, to connect causes with consequences. It transforms accountability from confrontation into culture.

The Fragility and the Possibility

Citizenship in Kenya remains fragile because many communities still inhabit a worldview inherited from decades of narrative scarcity. The stories that have circulated widely are stories of dependency, dysfunction, and fear. They do not reveal the creativity, intelligence, moral courage, and quiet organising that happens daily across the country.

But within Maono, we saw evidence of a different trajectory taking shape: journalists asking better questions, creators challenging their audiences, communities coming to the space to share issues, women reclaiming narrative authority, young people seeing journalism as a tool for justice rather than a hustle for survival. Narrative infrastructure does not simply inform citizens; it *forms* citizens.

Citizenship as a Story We Tell Ourselves Together

Citizenship is not a static status. It is a story continually assembled from the narratives available in a society. When those narratives expand, citizenship expands. When those narratives shrink, citizenship shrinks. When those narratives distort reality, citizenship becomes confused and compliant.

By rebuilding narrative infrastructure in Kilifi, we are rebuilding the civic imagination of the county: expanding what people believe is possible, restoring the dignity of public discourse, re-anchoring the meaning of participation, and re-locating sovereignty inside the community where it belongs.

Narrative infrastructure is therefore not an optional enhancement. It is the foundation on which the very idea of citizenship rests.

So what? The Work of Deepening

Deepening the work in Kilifi is not a matter of expansion or multiplication; it is the next natural movement in a story that has already begun to take shape. When a community starts to rediscover its narrative capacity, the question that follows is not “Where else?” but “What now?” Now, after the first layer of confidence has returned? What now, after journalists have begun to trust their own instincts? What now, after the community has seen glimpses of its own power reflected back to itself?

Deepening becomes the discipline of staying with the work long enough for it to transform from initiative into ecosystem, from effort into culture, from practice into identity.

The first task of deepening is to honour the relationships that have been built. Trust does not behave like an output; it behaves like a living organism. It grows when fed. It withers when ignored. Over the past year, journalists, creators, trainers, elders, and community partners formed a constellation of relationships around Maono. These relationships are the real infrastructure. Deepening demands that they be tended with patience: continuing conversations, strengthening the bonds between reporters, widening the circle of those who critique stories, and reinforcing the sense that Maono is not a service centre but a community.

The second movement of deepening is the maturation of craft. The early months taught techniques verification, structuring, research habits but mastery takes longer. A journalist only becomes fluent when the techniques dissolve into instinct.

Deepening means making room for that instinct to take root: more time with complex stories, more engagement with long-form work, more space for experiments in narrative, more opportunities for reflective practice. It means staying with reporters as they grow out of the comfort of superficial stories and take on work that demands emotional depth, intellectual discipline, and moral clarity.

The third dimension of deepening lies in embedding narrative accountability. Over the past year, community voices began to enter the room not as symbolism, but as active guides shaping angles and enriching understanding. To deepen is to treat this not as an occasional exercise but as a norm.

A county’s stories strengthen when its people become co-authors. Elders who know the moral history of a place, women who carry the hidden burdens of daily life, youth whose perspectives are

often dismissed are not informants; they are narrative anchors. Deepening means institutionalising their presence in the storytelling process, so the community becomes inseparable from the craft.

The fourth layer of deepening concerns courage. Courage does not appear suddenly; it grows in increments. Over the years, journalists began to take small risks asking harder questions, challenging long-held assumptions, stepping into stories that once felt too politically sensitive. Deepening means strengthening the systems that make such courage sustainable: the solidarity networks among reporters, the safe rooms at Maono, the quiet culture of accompaniment that makes one person's risk a shared endeavour. Courage matures when it is held in community.

A fifth movement emerges around the idea of narrative continuity. A county begins to transform when its stories stop appearing as isolated events and begin forming a coherent archive of an ongoing chronicle of agency, struggle, innovation, conflict, and resolve. Deepening means encouraging journalists to revisit stories, track progression, follow consequences, and document the long arc of civic life. It means replacing episodic reporting with narrative stewardship carrying the story over time so the county sees itself not in moments, but in trajectories.

The sixth aspect of deepening is memory cultivation. Storytelling is not only about the present; it shapes what a community remembers and forgets. Kilifi has a history of land injustice, cultural resilience, extraction, leadership, marginalisation, and reinvention. Deepening means equipping journalists with the tools to engage these histories—not nostalgically, but critically, as foundations for understanding the present. Memory becomes a compass for narrative integrity.

Finally, deepening involves strengthening the work's moral centre. Narrative infrastructure thrives when storytellers recognise that they are custodians of the public imagination. This recognition grows slowly, as trust builds, craft matures, courage strengthens, and relationships deepen. Over time, journalists begin to see themselves not merely as chroniclers of events but as stewards of civic possibility. This is where the work becomes irreversible: when a new generation of storytellers internalises the belief that their stories matter, that their country's dignity is worth defending, and that narrative is a form of citizenship.

Deepening, therefore, is not a phase. It is work. It is the discipline of remaining attentive to one group until the narrative ecosystem becomes self-sustaining, until truth has enough allies to stand on its own, until the story of Kilifi is told with the complexity, honesty, and humanity it deserves.