

The Tim Smal Show – 28 July 2020 transcript

Paula Rogo from Kali Media talks about diverse perspectives in storytelling.

Tim Smal (host): Hi everyone and welcome to the show today. My name is Tim Smal. Thanks for joining me. My guest on the show today is Paula Rogo. She is the founder and CEO of Kali Media. It is a Nairobi-based media company that creates content for Millennial and Generation Z women in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda through digital media and highly sought-after events. Paula, welcome to the show.

Paula Rogo (guest): Thank you for having me, Tim. I'm excited to be here.

Tim Smal: We certainly have a lot to talk about today on the show. But let's kick it off with you telling us a little bit about your media company.

Paula Rogo: Right. So Kali Media, like you said, it's really for the East African woman of today. And I created it because I'm a journalist by training and I quickly realized, a couple of years ago, after having moved back from the US where I'd lived for quite some time, that content – really good content for the women that I was seeing out and about in Nairobi and in and around East Africa, were not really being reflected in the media.

And for me, I really believe that media is a great indicator, or also a form of feedback, for a society, right? So if you don't see yourself in your media, or see yourself fully envisioned in the media that's fed back to you, there is a disconnect, I believe. So for me, Kali Media was a company in which I just wanted to create content for that woman – for that modern woman who is thriving and trying to survive in East Africa today.

Tim Smal: So your journey with creating Kali Media has been really interesting because you were born in Sweden and you lived in Kenya until the age of 13. And then you moved to the United States of America where you went to high school and university and graduate school. So you've certainly got a lot of life experience. Would you like to tell us more about your journey from your childhood through to the work you're doing today?

Paula Rogo: Yeah, it's very strange, Tim, to consider... I'm not good at reflecting. I tend to be someone who is very forward-thinking, which is also a pro and a con. So it's very strange to look back and consider my life. And in many ways, in looking back, I do actually feel quite disconnected because I'm so... I am very good at compartmentalizing. So I think it's actually really difficult for me to figure out a through line of my life, because there is Sweden life – which I barely remember. And there's Kenya life, when I was younger. And then even within the US, there's these specific periods for me.

And I always think – and maybe that's why I ended up being a journalist, that the one thing that I've always felt connected through, no matter where I was, is my work as a storyteller. And the way that showed up was the fact that I became a journalist. But even if I didn't become a journalist, I really feel like I would be doing some form of storytelling somewhere. And for me, I think I really enjoy listening to people and hearing people's stories. And hearing how people came to be and their motivations and why they are the way they are. Something about that human expression is really key and important to me. And maybe the fact that I've been able to – I've had the privilege to live in so many places and experience so many different types of people, has then also opened me up to being open to their perspectives, I think. Yes, I think that's really what it is for me.

Tim Smal: Well, I'm certainly very impressed that you hold a Master of Science in Journalism from Columbia University. And I'm really interested to find out whether journalism and storytelling was something that you always felt you wanted to get into when you were younger. Or if perhaps, you experienced a lot of influences from the world around you or your family that led you down that path. Can you tell me more about your journey into discovering this interest and passion in journalism?

Paula Rogo: Yeah. And you know, I don't know if you're one of those people Tim, they're people who like, come out of the womb and know exactly what they want to be – I want to be a doctor, I want to be all these things. And I was never that person. In fact, I think even though I've loved it, I think I fell into journalism, mostly because it's the thing I was really, really good at – writing. And I excelled in writing throughout school and it felt difficult... I have a very accomplished family – both my parents have PhDs, I have a sister who's a doctor, another sister who's a lawyer who's about to go get her PhD – as in I come from that kind of, very accomplished family. And even though I never had any pressure, the idea of just being a writer didn't sit well with me at the time when I was, sort of, pursuing careers.

And the one area that allowed me to do that that, quote unquote “I could hold onto and was a career that I understood” was journalism. And then because of, I guess, the pressures of the accomplishments I came from, I couldn't just be a journalist – I needed to go to the best journalism school in order, to sort, of prove that point. And so I think... it's funny – I was telling a friend the other day when she asked me something about if I always knew I wanted to go into business or journalism and I actually remember a time in high school: I think I was in my French class and we had to do an assignment in French talking about what we wanted to be when we were older. And I always hated that question, I was like “What do you want to be, what you want to study?” and it just was never interesting to me, or I struggled with answering it. And I remember at the time saying “I don't know what I want to do, but I know whatever I want to do does not exist yet.”

And I think there was some foretelling there, because the digital space we have today, and being an entrepreneur around digital media and around podcasting – well, that wasn't around in circa 2004 and so forth. So I think there was some foretelling there. So I think journalism for me – even though I still proudly hold on to that title – I think journalism was a transit point for me towards the eventual work that I will end up doing. Because even I... I don't even think the work that I'm doing with Kali Media and my other company Africa Podfest is actually, quote unquote “final destination career-wise” – which kinda sounds terrible, because I would like to be figured out at this point. But intuitively I just know that whatever I will end up doing or whatever will end up being my legacy is still, kind of, being created or is coming.

Tim Smal: Well, it sounds to me as if you have a personality type that likes to do a lot of different things or try a lot of different arenas of work. Because even within journalism itself, you have worked for a lot of different companies. You've worked for Reuters, you've worked for PBS. I'm quite interested to find out what it was like working on the Washington Week with Gwen Ifill. She really sparked your interest in journalism and I believe that you actually interned on the show in 2008, which was the year when she was the moderator of the vice presidential debate for the U.S. election.

Paula Rogo: There's journalism and then there's journalism in Washington, D.C., within the American context, which is politics – you know: hard news, White House, Congress, etc. And it's a very small, really established circle. And the queen bee, to say, of that circle

was Gwen Ifill, at a particular period in time. She was a moderator for Washington Week, which was a decades-old political roundtable that all the insiders in Washington used to watch on Friday nights – that's how you know it's a big deal. And she was also the co-host of PBS NewsHour, which is another really well known TV news show. And then she was also a black woman, which in the circles we were moving in for politics and news and journalism, was rare.

And so, even how I interned with her was serendipitous, because I remember it was 2008 and I had come home for the summer. I, at one point, actually thought I was going to go into finance and was even looking at interning on Wall Street and... that was a long time ago. And so I remember that summer, I was actually aiming for an internship somewhere in Wall Street and I had got an offer and I said “No” because it didn't feel right. I'm very much about intuition and so forth, and it didn't feel right. And also just... it was forced. I would do my journalism because I was part of the school newspaper and magazine, and then I'd go for my pre-finance classes and it was just not fun.

So I had come home for the summer and my mother did not want me sitting in the house doing nothing. And so down the street there was a... in the area there was a TV station and she told me “You've always liked journalism and news – go find something there.” I went in and asked if they had any internships and they mentioned that their documentary program had some openings. And this particular station was a PBS affiliate, WETA – it is actually the home of the Ken Burns documentaries, if you know that world of documentaries. Ken Burns is usually edited out of WETA. And so I came back and I didn't even know who Ken Burns was – I was just there because my mother sent me. And I ended up going for the interview and when I arrived for it, I entered the elevator and there was this black woman who joined me. And we were going up and she asked me where I was going and I mentioned the executive producer I was going to interview with for this documentary potential internship.

And she... we got to the same... we ended up getting off on the same floor – the fifth floor, I remember this very well. And then she just, sort of, grabbed my hand and just said “Can you just wait in this room?” And then I never saw her again. But someone – this other lady came in and interviewed me. And I barely remember the interview because I was just there, to be quite honest. And I ended up hearing that I got an internship, but I got an internship with this show called “Washington Week with Gwen Ifill” and I was so confused because I'd come to interview for something else. And it turned out the lady on the elevator was actually Gwen Ifill herself. And that is serendipity, right?

Because I didn't know who she was - I didn't know how she was a bigwig, I didn't even know the show. For whatever reason, she picked me on the elevator. And for whatever reason, I interviewed and said the right things to be picked. And that was a really big year for me because, like you said, she was... this was 2008 – this is Obama, the first black president – that's his campaign. And this was around May and the election was in November. So that whole period where he beat out Hillary Clinton, where the debates that happened that year... that year, what it meant to be black and in America and to see the first black president and to work for a black woman who was such a firestorm and such an influencer, changed my life. And that was what brought me into journalism, because I don't think I would have really picked it as my number one choice if I hadn't seen the potential of it.

Because it matters. It matters seeing people like you – or you identify with – doing a career or work that you could do. And I don't think I'd known anyone as intimately as I ended up

connecting with Gwen, who was doing the work that she was doing. And I think she just showed me “Hey, this is a career you can consider.” And then so, the work that then came afterwards, in working at Reuters and in working at all these different places, was actually me trying to figure out “Okay journalism, but there's so many types of journalism.” Reuters is hard, fast news – your deadline is now, your deadline is now, your deadline was a minute ago. I'm not that type of person who moves quickly like that. So I quickly realized “Okay, Reuters isn't for me – even though it's a really great place and career”. And I tried broadcast, I tried different sleeves – I tried different parts of journalism to see what worked for me.

And I think, they've all helped me, because I think I can go into pretty much any newsroom – whether broadcast, print or digital – and jump in pretty well and pretty easily. And that was all started from Gwen Ifill who was... she passed a couple of years ago – but who was one of the biggest influencers in my life.

Tim Smal: Wow, that's an amazing story. And it's always really incredible to hear a personal story like that, where a mentor has guided you through a season of your life and you found inspiration in working with them, or even looking up to them, in some respects. So I imagine that your experience working with Gwen Ifill, has really shaped your journey moving forward. And after your time in the U.S., you decided to relocate back to Kenya. In terms of the work that you're involved in on the continent of Africa, if you consider all of your experience in the U.S., studying and working in journalism – how do you feel that that has impacted the work that you are doing now?

Paula Rogo: Strangely enough, I'm tearing up. I don't know if you can hear it in my voice, but I'm tearing up because I also realize I haven't talked about Gwen in a very long time, and had a chance to tribute her in that way. Maybe it's part of the compartmentalism that I was telling you about earlier but, excuse my voice – you already brought out the tears Tim.

But to answer your question: I think, for me, you know, I moved to the U.S. when I was like 12, 13... and I was always very connected with home and with Kenya. But it was also very difficult to access the continent from that side of the world – especially during that period of time. And when you're in the diaspora, you're always so hungry for news from home – for any connection with home. And sometimes, the only – especially at that time – the only way you could get it was through news. And a lot of that news was... you know, the African story is very limited in its storytelling. And so for me, I'm very much the type of person where if I... if there's something I want to see, I do it - I create it. I don't wait for anyone else to do it. And I think that ended up being a thread, even in my journalism. I ended up going to places that would allow me to – even if, just in limited forms – allow me to report or do work on Africa. I think that's also a thread, in terms of the places I was allowed to go, or the places I considered working in.

And so my choice in actually coming back is that, I realized that there are very few companies in the West that would allow me to do the type of journalism about Africa that I wanted to do. And the type of storytelling that I wanted to do - this is storytelling that is nuanced, this is storytelling that gives us dignity. This is storytelling that's diverse in perspective. And there were places I worked where I was allowed that, but I still felt that there could be more. And because I'm the type to just create my own thing, I was like “You know what – let me do this.”

So I think what I've learned is that: what I've tried to do with my companies is create the spaces that allow other people to do more storytelling of themselves. So Kali Media is

“content creation for East African women” and my goal is to bring in East African women to do that storytelling, right? The goal with Africa Podfest is to allow space where hundreds and thousands of other African podcasters and listeners can connect, and that's storytelling in itself. Because I guess I always felt very limited in the range of stories I was allowed to put out there and share and tell. And I was always pitching and being turned down and being told “We've already done this and so forth.” And so this is where this comes from. I don't know if I'm going to be successful with it, because also making money – choosing to make money in this way is very, very difficult. Media is a very tough space. But, you know, I think the attempt matters.

Tim Smal: Well, let's chat some more about Africa Podfest. It's the region's first podcast festival that was set to take place in Nairobi, Kenya in March 2020. But of course, the event was postponed due to COVID-19 concerns. Can you tell me more about Africa Podfest and what it's going to look like in the future?

Paula Rogo: So the fact that Africa Podfest even exists is because I ran into a roadblock when putting together Kali Media. One of the key strategies Kali Media was going to follow was creating “Kalipods” which was supposed to be – or is supposed to be – this women-only podcast network, with women hosts and women-focused topics and so forth. And as I was building it, I quickly realized the roadblocks in investing in this space, in that there are just certain parts of the podcasting ecosystem that were not in place specific to Africa, that just had to be created in order for me to even consider Kalipods being a success, or even start doing the work I want to do around it.

So I had to like put Kali down briefly and run over to and create Africa Podfest. And the reason it came together is really: we're both African, we understand radio is king and the reach of radio on the continent. And here is a digital aspect of that platform of radio and the opportunities then are similar to the potential of radio. But also, like I said, the ecosystem and certain structures have to be in place for podcasting to really flourish in Africa. And you know, there are pockets – there are really great people doing great work in different parts of the continent, but they're not talking to each other - they're not sharing information. They're not coming together and innovating together.

Because there are things happening in Nigeria that Zimbabwean podcasters could really benefit from and vice versa and so forth with other parts of the continent. So that's really what Africa Podfest was supposed to be: it's a place that brings people together to convene and to ideate and to connect, as it pertains around African podcasting. So like you said, we had to cancel it due to COVID-19 – like, five days before we had to cancel it. And it was a curse and a blessing to do that – the blessing of it is slowly starting to show itself now. But really, with the Podfest just crashing to a halt, my co-founders (Melissa Mbugua and Josephine Karianjahi) and myself – we've actually been using this time to restructure the company to make it a year-round program, a year-round company for podcasters in Africa. So yes, Africa Podfest is the main attraction, is the main product out of our company – but we're also looking to create a lot of other great services, trainings, grants and so forth, specifically for African podcasters that allows for learning and connection year-round, likely in a digital way.

It's interesting because... well, I've only ever created two companies – but I've never had to have created one company, come to a halt quite quickly, and then restructure it for different goals. And so hopefully Podfest can come back. A lot of people have said “Why don't you take it digital?” and we are considering that amid the new restructuring. But for now, we really hope that sometime in the future, we can all come to Nairobi to connect and talk

about podcasting in person. Because I really do think, the person-to-person conferences and festivals are really important for connections, other than just the things that is on the topic of the festival itself. So that's what we're planning to do.

Tim Smal: Yeah, it's really interesting to learn more about Africa Podfest. And I'm sure there's so much room for growth – there's so much room for trying out new things. And so I guess, in many ways, you are still in the very early stages of a really exciting endeavour, so I will certainly keep my eye on Africa Podfest and hopefully even attend one of the festivals in the future.

But, right now, in the current times that we're in, you do actually have a podcast of your own, which is an African podcast for women in business. I love the name of your podcast – it's called: “I have no idea what I'm doing.” Can you tell me more about this podcast?

Paula Rogo: Yeah so... I really don't know what I'm doing. So when I moved back to Kenya and decided to start Kali Media – like I said, I'm a journalist. It's one thing to produce content and to produce media – it's another thing to produce it and monetize it and make it a company. And even though I was very connected to Kenya, I had been living outside the country for more than a decade. There's just things I did not know – like how to move within the country and so forth. And one of the benefits of being a journalist is curating media and creating content. And I felt like, if I'm struggling with finding information, because that was my issue: finding information about just how to start my company. Because I kept having to, sort of, go read what's happening in South Africa, or go read about what's going on in the US or what's going on in Europe business-wise and then bastardizing that research to, sort of, fit within Kenya. And so I thought “You know what, I have no idea what I'm doing, why don't I talk to women – other entrepreneurs who actually have done what I'm doing and they can also share what they've learned, what they know with other women.” And so that's what the podcast came out of.

And the podcast was two-pronged: I'm all about being efficient, so it was selfish in that, it was a chance for me to just interview all the people I needed to talk to in order to, sort of, start my business. So lawyers, accountants and so forth, about things I needed to know in starting my business. That was one – and then also, like I mentioned, I was considering Kalipods, this podcast network. And I knew there was potential in podcasting in Kenya, but I needed to test it. So also the podcast in many ways is a testing tool for me. And the result of that first season, which was actually supposed to be one season – a limited series podcast, 8 episodes... put it out there and see what happens. But the result of that showed me “You know what – podcasting is a route you can go to create the content for women that you aiming for.” And I then think also from this podcast Africa Podcast then also grew and evolved.

And so yeah, it was supposed to be a limited series – 8 episodes for the first season. It came out at the end of 2018 and then now, just during COVID-19, I've relaunched it again. And it's a little different, a little bit more personal, all about business – has aspects to do with money. And is also East Africa – but also probably expanding to the whole of Africa. And I'm just talking to women about what the journey of starting their business is, and just how difficult it is, and lessons they've learned so that anyone coming after us doesn't have to run into the same roadblocks.

Which I think, actually, is something I picked up in the U.S. among black women – and maybe it shows up in the example with Gwen Ifill. Maybe it's because of the plight of African-Americans in the U.S. and what they've had to struggle with in that country. But

they're very... especially black women – they will reach back. If they're in a room or at a table where they see you'd like to be, they will reach back and pull you towards that table or through that door. They will hold your hand through it – sometimes even if you don't realize (as in the case with Gwen) that you would like to go through that door. And I'm hoping that this podcast is that for other African women – that they're women who I get to talk to and who get to share their highs and lows and what it took to start their businesses – can learn and also do it themselves much easier.

Tim Smal: Yeah, that's really interesting to hear more about that. So as we come in for a landing today with the chat that we're having, I'm wondering if you have any advice for the folks listening out there, in terms of encouragement for people that are perhaps wanting to get into podcasting or who have really connected with your story. Maybe they're interested in journalism, or even specific takeaways for individuals living on the African continent – I'd just like to give you the opportunity to share some of your thoughts, in terms of encouragement and advice for the people out there.

Paula Rogo: Two things come top of mind. The first thing is: really go the path less traveled. Is that a Robert Frost poem? “Road Less Traveled...” I don't know if you know, Tim? But yes... if you would like a life that - and I recognize I am coming from an extreme place of privilege to be able to share this, but I think it applies for everyone in whatever world or space you're in. But if you want a life of interest, a life that will excite you, follow the road less traveled. It's a lonely road, it is a scary road, it is filled with a lot of doubt. It is a road with a lot of thorns – but it's never boring at all. And you'll get to meet like-minded people, exciting people and you'll also learn to just be okay with yourself. And I think that's really, really important. So always – even in the smallest way – try consider the road less travelled, because you never know where you'll end up. And sometimes it's a dead end – but sometimes it's really exciting.

And then the second thing is: to just trust your gut, to trust your instincts. It comes to mind... why does it come to mind today? It comes to mind because there's certain decision-making I've had to make in these recent weeks that are just bananas – they just do not make sense to anyone, even to me. But I know what my gut is saying. So maybe trust your instincts – or if nothing else, learn how to listen and connect with your instincts and your gut. Because usually it's telling you something that you need to connect with and respond to. And I think with those two things: the road less travelled and trusting your instincts – life can be quite exciting and full of verve, and full of just magical things.

Tim Smal: Wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing. I really appreciate that. And of course, it's been really wonderful to have you on the show today – thanks for coming on and sharing your wisdom with us.

If the listeners would like to get hold of you, your website is kali.media – that's probably the best place for them to reach you. But is there anywhere else where they can find you?

Paula Rogo: Yeah, they can. I'm on all the socials and I respond. So they can find me at [kalibawse](https://www.kalibawse.com) which is [@kalibawse](https://www.kalibawse.com). And I'm on Twitter and on Instagram, so I'm really accessible in that way. And if not, just go to the Kali Media website: kali.media – and you can find my email and I read all the emails. So feel free to contact me, I'm very accessible.

Tim Smal: Great. Well, thanks again Paula for joining me today on the show. It's a real privilege to have you on and I've really enjoyed speaking with you. Of course, I wish you all the best for the future and look forward to attending Africa Podfest.

Paula Rogo: Thank you so much Tim. This was fun and revealing. Thank you for having me on the show, it was such an honor.

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