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Conflict Sensitive Journalism during Elections: A Case study of 2017 General Elections in Kenya

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Abstract

Information dissemination is a sensitive issue in a country like Kenya where conflict and violence recur during general elections. The study looked into the nature of conflict sensitive journalism practiced in Kenya. Over the years, media has constantly been accused of fueling violence during elections following the nature of news disseminated. The media has the responsibility of censoring information before it is disseminated. The research study looked into the conflict related news items of the August 2017 general elections. The scope of the study was two television stations (NTV News Tonight and K24 News Cut) broadcasts at 9pm then. Purposive sampling was used to identify relevant content as pertains to the topic of study. A total sample size of 30 news bulletins were drawn from the two media stations with a focus to conflict sensitive news items and their placements in the broadcast. The news items put into focus for analysis were news stories, feature stories and conversations. The findings indicate that journalists can be agents of peace during and after the elections. However, for any journalism to be termed as good, professional standards should be practiced in communication. Also, journalists should go beyond the distribution of facts. Instead, they should strike a balance between telling facts and ensuring that those facts do not cause violence. In conclusion, media stations have the responsibility of maintaining peace and order in the country as opposed to propagating fear and division among the people.

Key words:
Media, conflict sensitive, politicians, journalism, post-election violence.

Introduction

The media plays a central role in shaping and setting agenda for the society. In most African countries, the media is sacrificed on the altar of commercial interests and profits (Ogenga, 2008). This is in disregard of peaceful co-existence among the different tribes living in Kenya. In Kenya, most conflicts are witnessed during elections, information collection and dissemination becomes an important affair. The existence of peace in any country is crucial as economic progress and development is concerned. There can be no development in any economy without peace.

Makamani, et. al. (2019) observes that media, whether digital, broadcast or print, are important instruments in creating peace or conflict in society. Media can therefore be leveraged both for constructive and destructive purposes depending on the contextual factors at hand.

Conflict is a situation where two or more individuals or groups try to pursue goals or ambitions which they believe they cannot share, (Howard, 2008). It is a struggle between two or more people over values, competition for status, power or scarce resources (Coser, 1967). Political leaders in pursuant of varying ambitions and interests, polarize the masses. Howard (2008), however finds out that not all conflict ends up in violence. Whenever there is change, some will oppose and others will embrace it, these differences may lead to conflict. The objectives of this study thus, was to analyze how journalism and conflict interrelate, and what conflict sensitive reporting is as opposed to traditional reporting.

Statement of the Problem

The media plays a crucial role during elections by informing the public and acting as a watchdog, but in some instances, it has been accused of fueling election-related violence through its reporting. Violence related to elections is increasingly a problem around the world, including in many African countries, (Anyango, S. 2017). In 2007/2008 post-election violence (PEV) in Kenya, Ahere (2019) observes that the media has continually been used as a propaganda tool by politicians. They have been at the helm of shaping and setting the conflict agenda to the audience, at times misleading the public on important policies and issues. To avoid such accusations during election, media should therefore take the responsibility of filtering the information they collect before disseminating it to the mass audience. Such initiative by gatekeepers would prevent dissention among its audience. It is on this background the study examines the interrelation between journalism and conflict, and the role of conflict sensitive journalism versus traditional reporting during general elections in Kenya. The objectives were (1) to analyze the media coverage of conflict in 2017 general elections and (ii) to examine conflict sensitive journalism during the 2017 general elections in Kenya.

Literature review

Media coverage of conflict

Anyango S. (2017) observed that media was basically accused of intensifying hate speech and tension that ensued the 2007 general elections following the pronouncements of unconfirmed provisional presidential results. Joshua Arap Sang, who was the presenter at one of the vernacular radio stations, was accused of using his show to advertise meeting points where retaliatory attacks were planned against the Kikuyu community living in some parts of Rift Valley Province (Anyango, S. 2017).

Lee and Maslog (2005) argued that the media focuses on who is losing, who is winning, the candidate with huge followership and the one with better arsenals. Such news ends up arousing the audience attitudes and perception about the election, arouse emotions that most of the time, leads to conflicts. When reporting is one-sided, it results to conflict between the two extremes. If the issues between the two opposing groups are reported in a balanced and professional way, a

peaceful co-existence ultimately prevails. If not, violence can be the outcome through fear, loss of lives and property and people scampering for safety.

Based on the coverage, the media may escalate or de-escalate political violence. Media coverage may not only overlook the fact that their audiences that are discordant, but also there are those that may have other sets of issues that are more important to them (Ahere, 2019).

In 2007/2008, the media played a huge role in exacerbating the post-election violence in Uasin Gishu County (Chebii, 2014). Chebii found out that while 70% of the respondents confirmed that media intensified violence in Uasin Gishu county, 83% of the respondents confirmed that media contributed to disagreements witnessed among the political elites in Nairobi, between January - February, 2018.

The media can create a peaceful environment during elections by participating in conflict resolution and remaining independent in their reporting (Puddephatt 2006). The media has a duty to conduct their reportage in a responsible and self-censoring manner (Gathara, 2017). The media should be accountable to the information they disseminate, this calls for the gate keepers who objectively monitor and evaluate the information before disseminating. In cases where the media provides the platforms for divergent opinions, Ahere (2019) argues that the engagement should be constructive. Such debates also furnish the public with information on how the government and democracy operates. On the contrary, any media that disseminates news as received without consideration of its impact on the audience is being insensitive to the society. Gathara (2017) observes that media houses that disseminated information in raw form are adjunct of hate speech that is uttered by irresponsible politicians. The media should not be partisan in reporting political or elections in a country such as Kenya that is fractured politically along ethnic lines.

News reporters and editors, whether knowingly or unknowingly, are specialists of conflict. They report on conflict as it happens without delving into the causes of conflict. According to Howard (2008), conflict will always arise when: resources like food, housing, jobs or land are scarce and not shared fairly; there is little or no communication between the two groups; the groups have incorrect ideas and beliefs about each other; unresolved grievances existing from the past; and power is unevenly distributed. Such issues, according to Howard (2008), need to be reported in an accurate and balanced way lest they result to conflict and violence among the populace of a country. During conflict, there should be good journalism where professional standards are practiced. It is also important to recognize that journalism can be hampered by either internal or external forces that emanate from media owners with selfish interests while external forces could be the government or politicians with personal agendas (Lee & Maslog, 2005).

According to Howard (2008), the precepts of good journalism include accuracy, impartiality, responsibility and reliability. Accuracy involves getting the right information and reporting as it is. In case of doubt, a journalist should not fear to call the source and verify the information. It also involves verifying the correct spelling of names, evidence, facts and meaning of what was said. Impartiality involves being balanced in conflict reporting and avoiding taking sides. Every story has two sides and a good journalist will write and include both sides of the story.

Responsibility entails having a duty to both the sources of information and to the people journalists report to. When the information is sensitive, a reporter has an obligation to protect the source for their safety reasons. Also, any reporting regarded as reliable should be impartial, accurate and responsible. Reliable reporting builds trust among the audience and ranges from copy and sound bites editing, writing headlines, producing, directing, and managing newsrooms among other roles (Howard, 2008).

Good journalism should not ruin peoples' reputation by telling lies, it should present facts and truth about the subject and leave people to judge (Howard, 2008). It disseminates accurate and reliable information. The intention of any journalism is not to harm others. Malicious information can put people to danger as well as cause public panic. Accepting "brown envelopes" in journalism is quite unethical and unprofessional. When reporters accept bribes, they ultimately distort facts and instead report in favor of the person who bribed (Howard, 2008).

Conflict sensitive reporting

Ahere (2019), fronts that media has constantly been accused of fueling dissent in the society based on some of the news broadcasted in a traditional manner. Some of the media houses disseminate images and information of victims of violence from one tribe being attacked by another tribe. As a result, the offended tribe, acting on the notion that they are killing our people, go up in arms with the tribe offending the other. A case in point is the 2007/2008 elections where the audience reacted in different ways following the unbalanced way of reporting the elections outcome. The media gave airtime to some of the demonstrators who were inciting violence. For instance, "*The demonstrators say it is because they are convinced Mr. Kibaki rigged the election. We want to send a very strong message to Kibaki, says one of the demonstrators. Because we cannot get him, we are going to work on his tribe - which is the Kikuyu here. When Kibaki got into power, he began to assist Kikuyus. The rest of the Kenyans are left in poverty. So this fight is between the haves and have nots*," (Howard 2008, P.34).

The media is among the actors that played a functional role in de-escalating the 2007/2008 post-election violence (Onyebadi & Oyedeji, 2012). Media did not just report on the violence, but rather made effort to report in a professional way which sensitized the populace on the need to end violence. Among the resources singled out for study were the Standard and Daily Nation newspapers. Both the newspapers set aside about 50% of their front pages to highlight the efforts both by local and international stakeholders call for peace. Only about 31% of their space showed the ongoing violence and the country's need to return to normalcy (Onyebadi & Oyedeji, 2012).

An example of the conflict sensitive reporting is: *The demonstrators say they are protesting because they believe that the election, which President Kibaki won, was rigged. "We want to send a very strong message to Kibaki," said Kazi Moto, one of the demonstrators, threatening action against Kikuyus living in the area. He claimed that when President Kibaki got into power he "began to assist Kikuyus" leaving other Kenyans "in poverty". He said this is a fight between the rich and the poor. Njenga wa Njenga, a Kikuyu farmer in the area said all he has acquired is through the sweat of his brow. "I have never received any assistance from the government. It is*

crazy for anybody to think Kibaki goes around dishing money to Kikuyus. We work hard," he said. Prof. Samson Samusa, a political scientist at Moi University said the unequal distribution of wealth in Kenya is historical and goes back to colonial times, (Howard 2008, P.34).

For conflict sensitive journalism, describing occurrences just as they happen is not enough (Howard, 2008). A journalist should look beyond distribution of facts. Conflict sensitive journalism is not practiced as in reporting soccer in a football match. Reporters in conflict reporting must strike a balance between telling facts and ensuring that those facts do not flare-up the country. One way conflict sensitive journalism can bridge the gap between the opponent sides is by reporting issues of commonalities. Stories regarding health issues, environmental conservation, proper farming techniques, and technological advancement can be equalizers at the height of political tension (Howard, 2008).

In traditional reporting cited above, the story carries blame, accusations and is one sided. It only focuses on the aggrieved party without proof of the accusations. The language used is emotional, for instance, how does speaker know president Kibaki rigged, assists kikuyus and no other tribe? Like, "work on his tribe", "left in poverty", and "the haves and have nots." The writer does not offer further explanation. The aggrieved person is not named in the story. It is not also explained to the reader why the demonstrator is anonymous. In conflict sensitive reporting, the story does not conclusively term the elections as rigged because there is no proof. The story avoids emotional language like "work on his tribe", "left in poverty", and "the haves and have nots." The story strikes the balance by seeking opposing opinions of the farmer and a political scientist.

Conflict sensitive journalism should therefore avoid reporting a conflict as if it has only two opposing sides. Instead of having extreme sides in a story, a journalist should look for other affected parties and air out their voices as well. Conflict sensitive journalism can as well avoid the political elites who make inflammatory statements in political rallies with an intention to polarize the populace. Instead, they should include the voices of the common people who wish well for the country and whose opinions too are shared by the common majority.

Methodology

The research study looked into the conflict related news items of the August 2017 general elections. The research population was the national television stations in Kenya to analyze media coverage of conflict content and examine conflict sensitive reporting. The scope of the study was two television stations (NTV News Tonight and K24 News Cut) broadcasts at 9pm then. Purposive sampling was used to identify relevant content as pertains to the topic of study. Kabir (2016), fronts that researchers who opt for purposive sampling method consume less time in gathering data. This fact contributed to the reason as to why the method was preferred. The researcher used systematic sampling to acquire the required sample size of the news bulletins of the two television stations. The researcher also used a coding sheet to collect the sample and tables to analyze the data collected. A total sample size of 30 news bulletins was drawn both from NTV and K24 television stations. The study had a close look at the number and type of conflict sensitive news items as well

as their placements in course of their 9pm news broadcast. The type of news items put into focus for analysis were news stories, feature stories and conversations.

The placement of the conflict sensitive stories for the three news items (news stories, feature stories and conversations) was also put into consideration. The purpose of the news items placement was used to identify the prominence given to conflict sensitive stories by the two television stations. The period which data was collected was from 12th August 2017 to 26th August 2017. Table 1 provides the details of the news items collected.

Table 1:
Summary of news items collected

DATE	Number of news items collected from NTV Tonight at 9PM	Number of news items collected from K24 News Cut at 9pm	Total number of news items collected
12.08.17	1	1	2
13.08.17	1	1	2
14.08.17	1	1	2
15.08.17	1	1	2
16.08.17	1	1	2
17.08.17	1	1	2
18.08.17	1	1	2
19.08.17	1	1	2
20.08.17	1	1	2
21.08.17	1	1	2
22.08.17	1	1	2
23.08.17	1	1	2
24.08.17	1	1	2
25.08.17	1	1	2
26.08.17	1	1	2
Total	**15**	**15**	**30**

Findings and Discussions

A total of 186 news items were analyzed drawn from both the NTV Tonight and K24 News Cut broadcasted at 9pm then. Three variables (news stories, feature stories, conversations) were measured to seek answers as to whether media is conflict sensitive during elections. The identified variables are as indicated in table 2.

Table 2:
Type of news items
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TV Station	News Stories	Feature Stories	Conversations	Total news items	Percentage
NTV	79	11	8	98	53%
K24	74	8	6	88	47%
Total	153	19	14	186	
Percentage	82%	10%	8%	100%	**100%**

The findings reveal that a total of 153 news stories, 19 feature stories and 14 conversations were used by the two television stations which translates to 82%, 10% and 8% respectively. This indicates that the two stations (NTV and K24) preferred the use of news stories as opposed to the use of feature stories and conversations. Additionally, NTV had a total of 98 news items compared to 88 news items used by K24 which translates to 53% and 47% respectively. This shows that NTV had a huge number of news items as compared to K24.

Table 3:
Number of conflict sensitive news items

TV Station	NTV	K24	Total
Conflict sensitive news items	72	64	136
Total number of stories	98	88	186
Percentage of conflict sensitive news items	73.4	73	73

Table 3 indicates the number of conflict sensitive news items broadcasted by the two stations. Out of the total 186 news items broadcasted during this time, 136 news items, which translates to 73% were conflict sensitive. 72 out of the total 98 news items broadcasted by NTV were conflict sensitive while 64 out 88 news items broadcasted by K24 were conflict sensitive. This translates to 73.4% and 73% respectively by the two stations. The finding reveals that both stations were geared towards conflict sensitive reporting during the 2017 general elections.

Table 4:
Placement for conflict sensitive news items

TV Station	Beginning	Middle	End
NTV	6	56	10
K24	3	45	16
Total	9	101	26

Table 4 features the placement of conflict sensitive news items at the beginning, middle and the tail end of the news bulletins by the two stations. A total of nine items featured at the beginning, 101 in the middle while 26 occurred at the tail end of the news bulletins. Majority of conflict

sensitive news items featured in the middle and slightly more at the tail end of the news bulletins. NTV had 6 conflict sensitive news items occurring in the beginning, 56 in the middle and 10 at the tail end while K24 had three occurring in the beginning, 45 in the middle and 16 at the tail end. The findings reveal that, although conflict sensitive stories were more, they were not prioritized in terms of news items placement for broadcast. The number and placement of conflict sensitive news items indicate how media sets the agenda and frames its programs as well. Among the news items analyzed, the two stations managed to strike the balance between telling facts and ensuring the same does not flare-up the country. It is clear then that media, through their programs, is a key player in either maintaining peace or triggering and exacerbating conflict before, during and after elections.

Conclusion

When journalists evaluate peaceful ideas from wherever they emanate and present them during electioneering periods, such stories result to peace. Political rhetorics made by politicians during electioneering period rarely amounts to peace. The powerful arsenals journalists have to make peace before, during and after elections are words and photographs. Every journalist, as identified in this research study, has a responsibility of maintaining peace and order in the country as opposed to propagating fear, violence and division among the people.

Recommendations

Conflict sensitive journalists should avoid reporting what divides two parties in a conflict. Instead, they should interrogate the opposing sides to find out their common interests and capitalize on such. It is also important to treat the suffering sides equally than focus on one side only. It is important to note that, every political faction has its equal measure of strengths and weaknesses. Conflict sensitive journalism should also practice proper diction while reporting sensitive matters. Inflammatory words like terrorized, tragic, killed and devastated, among other words that are emotional and imprecise should be avoided in conflict sensitive journalism. Instead, the media should strive to strike a balance between telling facts while ensure such details does not cause conflict among the people of different political divides.

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Authorship Statement
The author was solely responsible in the conceptualization of the research idea, development of the research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of the research findings and writing of the manuscript. As a result, the author takes full responsibility for the information published and the final version of the manuscript.

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Research Approval
The study covered an in-depth analysis of NTV (*News Tonight*) and K24 (*News Cut*) public news television broadcast during the 2017 general elections in Kenya. The research analyzed the broadcast content without engaging human respondents. There was no formal ethical approval or NACOSTI research permit obtained for the study.

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