ROLE OF MEDIA IN CONFLICT; A CASE OF 2007/2008 POST ELECTION VIOLENCE IN KENYA

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Abstract

The media plays a significant role in reporting conflict. The nature of that role—as a perpetrator of conflict or agent for peace—largely depends on the framing and agenda setting of the media. Kenya has had its fair share of conflicts and some are still being experienced today. The 2007/2008 post-election violence was however the most devastating. It is therefore useful to find out whether media covered it sensationally or otherwise. Conflict theory and peace journalism theory were used to guide the study. The two theories brought out the issues of resources and conflicts and how journalists should informatively report on them. The aim of this study was to analyze the role of media in conflict, with reference to 200/2008 Post Election Violence in Kenya. The specific objectives were to explore the causes of the post-election violence, to establish the extent to which media escalated and/or deescalated violence, and to assess the impact of media reports on post-election violence. Interviews and content analysis were used to gather in-depth data. The findings will be used by media to formulate policies, benchmark and tailor programs which focus on peace journalism.

Keywords: *Media's role, violence, conflict resolution, conflict-sensitive reporting, reconciliation*

1.1 Introduction

The Mass media often plays a key role in conflict. Basically, their role can take two different and opposed forms. Either the media takes an active part in the conflict and has responsibility for increased violence, or stays independent and out of the conflict, thereby contributing to the resolution of conflict and alleviation of violence. Which role the media takes in a given conflict, and in the phases before and after, depends on a complex set of factors, including the relationship the media has to actors in the conflict and the independence the media has to the power holders in society.

Article 34 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) guarantees freedom and independence of electronic, print and all other types of media. It also states that the state shall not exercise control over or interfere with any person engaged in broadcasting, the production or circulation of any publication or the dissemination of information by any medium or penalize any person for any opinion or view or the control of any broadcast, publication or dissemination. But to what extent does this freedom accelerate conflict?

Information is power and insight can impact on public discourse. This way, perceptions can be changed by access to media. Different types of media are utilized globally to distribute knowledge and idealistically, free mass media is a tool for democracy. Freedom of expression is not only the core of a healthy media but also a

fundamental human right and vital for a democratic structure. It stands for freedom of speech, the right to information and the representation of different opinions in a heterogeneous society. In any culture of prevention, effective and democratic media are an essential part and indispensable for societies trying to make a transition towards peace and democracy.

On the one hand, free, independent and pluralistic media provide a platform for debate and different opinions. On the other hand, media can be misused for propaganda purposes, to incite hatred and spread rumours and therefore artificially create tensions. The transmission of ideas is also not limited to conventional media such as newspapers, television or radio. Arguably, the traditional media takes primacy in this, however, new technologies, the internet and digital content should also be considered in this context.

1.2 Literature review

Post-election violence in Kenya

Post-election violence in 2007/2008 was the deadliest Kenya has experienced since independence in terms of destruction of property, deaths, and displacement of people. According to the government, as many as 1000 people were killed, 500, 000 displaced and many injured (https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/03/16 retrieved on February 26, 2017).

The crisis in Kenya was triggered by flawed electoral process, but many of the tensions that exploded in December 2007 were years or even decades old. In the 2002 general elections, Kenyans voted overwhelmingly for an end to dictatorial government, corruption, inequality, political violence, and systemic abuse of office. The National Rainbow Coalition (NaRC) promised a new constitution, commissions to address large-scale corruption and arbitrary land-grabbing by the elite, as well as measures to tackle landlessness, unemployment and police reform. One by one those promises were abandoned by the incumbent regime as the NaRC coalition fell apart while impunity and corruption became further entrenched.

For many Kenyans, the rigging of the 2007 presidential election was the final betrayal of that agenda for change. Voting on December 27 proceeded smoothly with record numbers of registered voters and a record turnout. The parliamentary results were swiftly tallied and announced on December 29, resulting in major losses for the ruling Party of National Unity (PNU) party. The presidential vote, however, soon took a different turn. Different communities including Luos, Kalenjins and Kikuyus turned against each other.

Spontaneous violence resulted after the announcement of the election results in various parts of the country resulting in clashes between supporters of the government and the opposition mainly in Rift Valley (Molo, Trans Nzoia, Eldoret and Kericho towns). Houses, shops, and churches in some regions were touched to the ground. Attackers appeared to have aimed primarily at chasing away the targeted victims. Instances of killings, sexual assault, and displacement of families were reported in the media. Roadblocks were erected out of cut trees and rocks by groups of youth who stopped traffic to extort money and harass members of targeted communities (UN Human Rights Team Report on Post-Election Violence in Kenya, 2008)

Kenyan and International media reported the conflict from a high-risk security perspective. Killings, police engagement with protestors and looting was played out in the media. Television camera captured and aired images that may have caused retaliation and tension. Mobilization of protests from members of the opposition is said to have been done through the media majorly vernacular radio stations. On December 30, 2007, the Police Commissioner announced that public rallies were banned and the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Information issued a notice to all media houses ordering the suspension of all live broadcasts in an attempt to curtail further pronounced violence.

Media and conflict: the ambivalent relationship

In Kenya, media stations are state-owned or private. Most private media stations are owned by politicians or powerful elite. News media are supposed to be objective but this objectivity can be jeopardized if it goes against the interest of the owner. The powerful are generally in favour of the status quo. In many cases, therefore, the media hardly fulfil their role as a critical watchdog - a role which would be even more important in countries where few checks and balances exists between different institutions, and where power is highly concentrated in few hands.

Private mass media largely depend on advertising revenue for survival. This may lead to sensational reporting. In this way, media can easily contribute to the escalation of conflicts, because acts of violence may dominate the news, and peaceful interaction remains underreported. Media audiences tend to consume more negative news content than positive news – backing the statement, "what bleeds, leads". It's through this that we need to understand the agenda setting role of the media.

In a country with 42 ethnic communities and tribal clashes and tension between communities rocking during electioneering period, the media needs to understand the immense power they have in shaping public perception and opinion and approach issues with sensitivity.

The agenda setting theory explains the connection and association between the rate at which the news media cover stories and the extent to which such stories dominate public discourse. The theory argues that news media reports have significant influences on the opinions and perceptions of audiences, especially on their choice of the stories to consider newsworthy, including how much prominence and space to assign those news items. The principle postulate of agenda setting theory is salience transfer, which is the ability of a media organization to successfully transfer issues and opinions of critical importance from their news media agenda to public agenda in a way that prime the viewpoints and perspectives of their audiences (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

The media set the agenda for every discussion in the public sphere by giving attention to specific issues or objects within government, socio-economic and political institutions, and more recently among business organizations. The severity of the object of discourse being accorded attention in the print media is often determined by the size of the headline, length of the story, while the frequency of news mention in the electronic through repetition and occurrence of a specific news story in the media within a given period determine the salience and importance of a news item among the public audience (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Peace journalism theory versus Conflict theory

Peace journalism is based on the proposition that the choices journalists make while covering conflicts tend inescapably either to expand or contract the space available for the society at large to imagine and work towards peaceful outcomes to conflicts.

Johan Galtung, the father of peace journalism postulated that news about conflict has a value bias towards violence. Peace journalism is therefore a measure to correcting that bias by shedding light on structure and cultural causes of violence. It aims to frame conflicts as consisting of many parties and pursuing many goals rather than a simple dichotomy. Peace journalism aims to promote peace initiatives and to allow the reader to distinguish between stated positions and real goals.

War/Conflict journalism is journalism about conflict that has a value bias towards violence and violent groups. This usually leads audiences to overvalue violent responses to conflict and ignore nonviolent alternatives. This is understood to be the result of well documented news reporting conventions. These conventions focus only on physical effects of conflict.

On the one hand, Peace Journalism is oriented to conflict transformation, to inform with veracity, it cares for the opinion of the victims of the conflict, and it understands peace as a solution of a conflict where all the involved parties receive some benefits. Such kind of journalism demands that the journalist take an interpretative approach, concentrated on the stories that highlight peace initiatives; it tones down ethnic and religious differences; anticipates later conflicts; focuses on the structure of societies in conflict; and promotes the solution of the conflict, reconstitution and reconciliation. War journalism, on the other hand, has four main features: it is oriented to violence and war, is highly influenced by propaganda, it focuses on the opinion of the elites and it focuses on zero-sum game, that is, one part wins all other parts lose (Galtung, 2002 and Teresa Nicolas Gavilan, 2011).

1.3 Methodology

Content analysis was used to understand the nature of new coverage during the post-election violence in 2007/2008 by examining media reports and cuttings. The study targeted population of individuals in Migori County who reside in the conflict area and also journalists who covered the conflict. Interviews with journalists on election issues as reflected in the mass media content were used to get in-depth data.

Migori County is in Nyanza Province, Kenya; a region that is considered the opposition's stronghold. Migori was one of the towns largely affected by post-election violence of both 2007/2008 and also 2017.

1.4 Discussion

The media as a platform is meant to crystallize public opinion as only one part of its duty. Its primary responsibility is pivoted around being a conduit between the incident and those who should be informed of it. This means the media has a duty to collect facts, ascertain and verify the truth behind them, and put them out before the masses. It is not for the media to insinuate, to decide, or to pass value judgement on any subject it explores. The duty of the mass media begins and ends with the sole duty to be blind to prejudice, and to expose facts that are grounded in committed verification.

The role of the media in containing tension by reporting pure fact cannot be over emphasized. As a voice that offers information, the media is perhaps among the earliest to know about the country's fragile state, or at the very least, to know where the country's fragile areas lie. Instead of exacerbating conflict by playing up on these divisive aspects, the media should function from a place of objectivity. However, during violence, emotions are heightened. The mere mention of facts in itself can be a cause of violence. For instance, spontaneous attacks cropped in some regions as soon as the incumbent was sworn in. But it is not until it was highlighted in the media that certain communities had turned against each other, that other parts especially in Central Province began retaliating. Yet, it was the media's role to inform people on what is happening. Thus, Johan Galtung's conflict sensitive reporting comes in.

Internal conflicts do not occur spontaneously but tend to have a history. Local media, especially vernacular stations, have a deeper understanding of the existing political structures, the participants of the conflict as well as the changes preceding the outbreak of violence. The media can therefore not only influence society before the conflict by recognizing and properly addressing the issue but also afterwards. Unlike international media

covering conflicts, local media are a recognized part of society with the ability to accelerate and magnify fears or reduce them.

The media have the power to defuse tensions before they even reach a critical point and keep a critical eye on the government and opposition. By supplying credible information and reaching a large audience, the media help in managing conflicts and promote democratic principles (Chomsky, 2010). When asked about the causes of violence, respondents almost unanimously mentioned election fraud, and built up disappointment of the government as the major causes. For the, elections is a time for change yet election fraud diminished the little hope they had for a 'better leadership'. Some mentioned that since independence, only two communities have been in the government as presidents which made them feel as if their community was left out. However, the researcher noted that during the post-election violence, even communities perceived to always hold power; that is, Kikuyus and Kalenjins, were reported to have turned against each other.

Journalists interviewed while conducting research said lack of skills in covering post-election violence was their major challenge. Violence was covered like ordinary news items where the actors of the conflict were openly mentioned. For instance, the Daily Nation (one of Kenya's biggest newspapers) carried a story on 20th December, 2007 detailing the chaos. A paragraph cut from the story read: "*The epicentre of the violence is the Rift Valley, pitting members of the Kalenjin and Luo ethnic communities, who mainly back Odinga, against their Kikuyu neighbours, to which Kibaki belongs*". Although the intention of carrying that story was just to inform people of what was happening in other regions, this may have fuelled chaos since those communities perceived they have been peacefully staying with other tribes, yet their counterparts in other regions were being attacked for their political affiliation. The researchers found almost all journalists were unanimous that news of conflict should be covered sensitively especially where ethnic communities are concerned.

Journalists mentioned the need for conflict sensitive reporting every often. Before the 2013 national elections, the UN conducted training on conflict transformation and taught journalists how to cover news. However, since then many vernacular radio and TV stations have being opened. There is need to further train journalists especially every electioneering period to sensitize them on the impact of their choice of words during coverage.

Media and journalism can be of great assistance in conflict management and peace building. The media can be a good tool in a healthy and functioning environment but more is needed than ethical and responsible reporting to ensure lasting peace and safety. The role of the media is twofold: on the one hand, the media report and reflect on pressing issues for propaganda purposes and instead of revealing truths, try to cover things up and by this curtail people's freedom and right to information. Regardless, the potential of the media in conflict and post-conflict situations remains a net positive, and has been sadly underutilized to this point in time.

Other journalists also mentioned ownership of the media enterprise and political trend of editorials as factors affecting coverage of news on conflicts. One journalist said "editors have a stake in what goes on air or print. Sometimes they have to consider the interests of the owner which may change the overall tone of a news report. Even editors and owners will edit information that can bring displeasure of the elite". Another journalist said, "First I am a Kenyan from a particular ethnic community and then a journalist. Yes we are supposed to be objective but there are times that become a challenge since we have political affiliations even though we don't say it out rightly".

The researcher also wanted to know to what extent the media escalated or deescalated the conflict. A reporter working for a national newspaper said instructions from their editors for covering conflict during the post-

election violence was similar to other news. "We were to collect facts and compile stories like we always do. As soon as chaos broke out, reporters were sent to various towns to expose the conflicting parties; individuals responsible for the attacks". The researcher deduced that this could have potential of causing more chaos.

The essential objective is to tell the audience what is really happening by providing them as much contexts and backgrounds as possible and presenting them the sides of all parties involved. Refraining from alarmist or over sensationalized reporting will go a long way towards keeping the media within its line of duty.

1.5 Conclusion

Occurrences in our day-to-day lives are the main source of news. Data analysis of news coverage on some factors supporting the peace process, i.e. violence, peace dialogue and reconciliation, showed that the news coverage dynamic are greatly affected by the events and facts in the field. For example, when more violence happened in the field, the news occurring in newspapers and television would be more violence-nuanced with flashy headlines and images of conflict being given more airtime/space. Otherwise, when the conflicting parties started peace talks and mediation, the media would report it. Therefore, the result of this study strengthens one of theses by Teresa Nicholas Gavilan on the relation between media and news coverage in conflict that states that when level of violence is higher, the role of media in conflict resolution process will be decreasing. Otherwise, when there is more peace dialogue/reconciliation held, the role of the media in conflict resolution process will be more significant.

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