

Ethnic Polarization in Kenya: Media Framing in Political Interviews

Research
Article

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Abstract

Ethnic polarization is a common and growing issue in Kenya due to heightened political contentions surrounding general elections held every five years. A popular media genre employed in political communication is the 'political interview' that involves the journalist (as the interviewer) and the politician (as the interviewee). Often, several politicians representing opposing factions are engaged. The political news interview is a specialized genre that is used to disseminate political information. This article investigates the frames used by the media in ethnic polarization in Kenya. Some of the most common polarizing agents are hate speech and name calling. News framing analysis is used to find out these frames. Among the key findings is that the media practitioners are guided by the competitive nature of the industry. For them to be profitable they have to pull a huge audience to their programmes because for them the audience is a product for sale to the advertiser. This leads them to select contentious topics as well as controversial figures who will defend, with firm stances, the parties they represent. The interviews are also broadcast over a long time as compared to normal news programming. The result of this kind of framing is a polarized audience.

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INTRODUCTION

The popular image of Africa is that of a continent with countries incessantly rent by ancient ethnic enmities that complicate and retard the development of national consciousness (Okoth and Ogot 2000). Many countries in Africa such as Nigeria, Egypt, South Sudan, Burundi and Kenya have, in the recent past, experienced deep turmoil due to political instability. Conflicts in Africa are largely attributed to, among other issues, religious, political and ethnic differences; unequal distribution of resources; bad politics. The media, including news and social media channels, take advantage of these moments to increase their popularity but, in many instances they only aggravate conflicts when they provide negative coverage and misplaced social mobilization of the populace. Many examples in Africa prevail in countries like Rwanda, Kenya, South Sudan and Egypt to mention but a few.

Whenever nations are at war, mediation takes place. In Kenya, for example, when ethnic polarization reached its peak in 2007, in a post-election violence, there was concern from the citizens and the international community that the country resolves the crisis. International mediation began where perceived symbols of peace including Desmond Tutu (South African religious figure), John Kufuor (former president of Ghana), Kofi Annan (former UN Secretary General), were invited to preside over the mediation. It was Kofi Annan's team of eminent African personalities that gave rise to the power sharing deal that saw the creation of the Grand Coalition government (Oyugi 2013).

While these efforts momentarily suppressed the ethnic tensions, political tension still persists through hate speech and ethnic profiling, where political leaders have been heard or quoted uttering polarizing remarks via mass media platforms in Kenya such as newspapers, radio and television. Various media genres and/or formats such as news (broadcast and print), talk show discussions and interviews, documentaries, features and profiles are deployed for political communication and political analysis. News media channels such as television are central in political communication because politicians understand the role of the medium in retaining power and influencing citizens (McNair 2011). Television helps to create a new reality populated by spin doctors, pollsters, pundits and media consultants. Eventually political life begins to conform more closely to the image of politics that television portrays it to be. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach this paper analyses frames used in selected political news interviews aired on Kenyan TV platforms three months to and three months after the 2013 general elections in Kenya.

Research Context

Kenya became a multi-party state in 1991 after a long battle between activists and the regime of the time. Activists had for a long time fought for freedom and democratic space. From 1992 to date, there has been a proliferation of political parties. These parties have been formed by renowned figures like Raila Odinga, Kijana Wamalwa, Sineon Nyachae, George Anyona, Kenneth Matiba, Charity Ngilu, Mwai Kibaki, James Orengo among others. When these parties are formed, the pioneers mobilize their ethnic communities for support. The result has been a country with parties identifiable through ethnic communities. The media in Kenya have also played to this tune and their coverage of news, selection of events and newsmakers in relation to politics are based on their perception of ethnic leanings. One of the media genres that has been used to disseminate political information in Kenya is the political interview. Major media stations in Kenya according to the popularity index of Communication Authority of Kenya (Citizen, Kenya Television Network (KTN), NTV, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and K24) air political interviews each week. These interviews are aired during or after prime time news, usually on topical events of the day. These events are carefully selected by the media personnel on the basis of newsworthiness. These events are usually based on conflict and they draw audiences to them by framing a picture of disunity among political figures. They increase in frequency

and intensity in the periods surrounding general elections in Kenya. This study is based on the period before and after the 2013 general elections of Kenya.

Theoretical Framework

Media framing as the second level of agenda setting (McCombs 2004) is a mechanism of influence in which journalists employ a frame of confrontation in presenting an issue to the public. In other words, media coverage is characterized by an active construction, selection and structuring of information to organize a particular reality in a meaningful manner for the public (Gamson et. al. 1992). Framing occurs when media make some aspects or particular issues more salient than others to promote a certain problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommended (Entman 1993). This selection of particular attributes of a story gives important information about the perspective of the media sources. These perspectives of the media in turn can make selected attributes salient and shape public opinion differently in political contexts with varying coverage. A limited set of media messages can lead to a narrow range of activated attitudes in the collective public opinion, as Entman states (1993).

Tinkam and Weaver (1993) note that media framing can also influence opinion through the choice of news sources. This is because sources differ in credibility and those that are seen as more credible can be more persuasive or influencing opinion. Entman in Severin and Tankard (2010) states that framing does affect the news in many ways, for example in the choice of topic, sources, language and photographs. Tankard defines framing as: "The central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration" (Griffin, Ledbetter and Sparks 2015). In the selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration, the writer, reporter or anchor transforms the message to suit particular motives or goals. This paper uses these ideas to establish whether framing leads to ethnic polarization in the Kenyan context.

Street (2001) indicates that a neutral media presents a fair account of the facts. He however notes that to achieve neutrality is impossible for the following reasons. First, he says that the practicalities of the media's daily routine mitigate against giving full account. This is because the media are constituted as businesses who have to serve a market (audiences and advertisers) and this means tailoring the reporting to the needs of the market. Therefore long, factual accounts may drive viewers away. There are also deadlines to be met. It is observed then that these pressures compromise a complete factual account. Another reason is that reporters cannot record all the facts because a singular event contains a myriad of facts. Hence these facts have to be selected on some criterion of relevance. These selected facts become part of a story with a narrative that links them together. This process of selection and interpretation causes reporting to deviate from the idea of recording facts.

These tenets of media framing guide this study to determine how Kenyan media frame issues in the political news interviews that would lead to ethnic polarization.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, five media stations were studied, namely KTN, Citizen, KBC, K24 and NTV. These are the most popular television stations in Kenya according to (Communication Authority of Kenya 2012). Six political interviews were analyzed using Gail Jefferson's convention (1972) as cited in Peräkylä (2004) and content analysis was carried out to identify different frames. Five journalists that carry out political news interviews were interviewed to give information on their selection of topics, events, as well as the interviewees for their programmes. Audience analysis was carried out in form of

focus group discussions to establish the interpretation the audience gives to the political news interviews and the effect the frames may have on the audience. Political analysts who appear as experts on political matters were interviewed to give information on the effect of framing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, media frames were identified from the sampled political news interviews during transcription. Information from the journalists, audience survey and political analysts was used to determine the frames and their general impact on the audience.

The media focus attention on certain events and they place them within a field of meaning. This field of meaning can have an effect on the audience's beliefs and behaviour by connecting a particular meaning or interpretation of an issue (Entman et. al. 2009). Frames determine what is selected, excluded, emphasized, hence present a packaged.

Journalists reported that they had to select parts of the events that would be considered attractive. Journalistic practices call for prominence, timeliness and conflict among other news values. This is why particular types of stories were chosen and not others. In all the interviews selected, there were other events that would have been given focus but the reporters and interviewers chose other events that were more attractive to the audience and hence attractive to advertisers. This is congruent with what Van Dijk (2008) observed. He says that newsworthiness is based on ideological and professional criteria that grant preferential media access to elite persons, organizations and nations, thereby recognizing and legitimating their power.

Interview 1:

It begins with a narration that describes a political party. It gives a detailed report on its formation by especially emphasizing the fallouts that had taken place and highlighting the conflicts that were witnessed before it got to its current form. The interviewer chooses particular salient aspects to ask like devolution, the youth agenda, democracy and development.

Interview 2:

In discussing the presidential ticket of two politicians, both the interviewer (IR) and the interviewee (IE) made reference to predicted consequences if they would actually win the elections:

IR: What will that do to us INTERVIEWEE? Let's say we wake up on March 5th, we have president POLITICIAN 2 and deputy president POLITICIAN 3.

IE: Ahh, we'll have to live with it. But what that means is that we become a barrier state. The Americans and Britons have told us that 'we will give you sanctions.' And what that basically means is that everything we have been doing for the last five years or so under POLITICIAN 5 will have to be jeopardized.

In this manner, both the interviewer and the interviewee are packaging the information in favour of one political group's frame of reference. They are labeling some figures as unfit for public office.

Another instance of framing in interview 2:

IR: But isn't POLITICIAN 1 the one who surrendered POLITICIAN 3 to The Hague? Who let him to the dogs?

IE: *He had to let him do that because POLITICIAN 3 was one of his kingmakers. So he had to actually destroy the kingmaker and the king in waiting.*

Such remarks would not go down well with supporters of POLITICIAN 3. They would feel betrayed and set up for destruction. They continue by saying:

IE: *The first criteria for whoever we choose as president must be a guy who will not spoil what he has done and that is the reason why when he looks at POLITICAN 2 he thinks there will be politics for the next ten years.*

In this manner, POLITICIAN 1 is being presented to the audience as a villain who just betrayed a fellow politician. These politicians belong to different ethnic groups and when members of one ethnic group hear that their own was let to the “dogs”, they get agitated and the result is polarization. In fact, the use of the term “dogs” to refer to the International Criminal Court (ICC) is metaphorically used to show how POLITICIAN 3 would suffer.

The interviewers’ language seems to discredit POLITICIAN 2 who seemed to be a popular choice by a section of Kenyans. This election is framed as a two horse race between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga. The term “two horse race” is being used to set the mood of a lot of contention and hate speech between Kikuyu and Luo communities, which are said to be large communities. Some of the comments that followed in the interview are:

Luos cannot lead this nation.

Kikuyu operatives will always steal elections.

Interview 3:

The topic of discussion was chosen out of a press conference where a political party was giving an evaluation of the government’s performance. A remark that seemed to ethnically profile a journalist was picked and it became the subject of discussion in the interview. The rest of the details of the press conference were left out completely. The contentious topic of discussion invited heated discussions.

Politician: *What is your name again?*

Journalist: *(Says his name).*

Politician: *Your name betrays you.*

“Your name betrays you” is a remark meaning that the journalist is being harsh on the politician because the journalist is coming from the president’s tribe.

Interview 4:

The IR starts by describing the topic of discussion as “elephant in the room” giving the audience certain expectations and discusses an emotive issue on public appointments. The use of the metaphor “elephant in the room” shows that there are many unresolved issues which will bring about contention and hence polarization.

Interview 5:

The interviewer selected topics to be discussed including Anglo-leasing, Devolution, and government performance. These topics were very contentious and would attract a heated exchange between the interviewees and result in polarizing ethnic communities.

IR: Away from the Anglo-leasing, this is something that is ongoing and developed here now, the score card, the thirty page score card you say ‘these are the lies Jubilee government is telling you’ – let’s respond to some of the easily spotted or highlighted lies, for instance, the laptop project. In defense, do you think you have filed or not?

IE: No no. To begin with, which are the lies? Which lies were picked out. And who...

IR: For instance, if a Kenyan were to ask you, where are the laptops?

IE: Fine. Very simple. The government already undertook what should have been done to initiate the laptop project. We went straight to tendering. We went straight to evaluation, that was all done and straight to our word and from there the matter was taken to court. And remember Jubilee’s policy and manifesto (‘uwezo, upendo, uwazi’—independence, love and transparency). When we got to that point when we were taken to court because of the laptop project, it was prudent and important to wait. Let the courts do their job. Let them evaluate, let them judge. Once it is clear, we are ready, the money is set aside, 29 billion for the project. Immediately it is cleared by the court, we go straight to roll out and within the first year, we hit the road running.

IR: Sounds like a good defense there on the laptop project. But what do you say of other promises that the Jubilee government...

Interview 6:

The interview involved three politicians, two from the government side and one from the opposition wing. There was also one political analyst. The interviewer chose to select a contentious item from many items and dealt with devolution. While the opposition side claimed that the government was undermining devolution efforts; the government side defended their decisions by saying that there was corruption in the counties.

IR: Let’s start with you. The CORD coalition has been very vehement that this government is hell bent on derailing devolution. What do you base that premise on?

IE 1: I would tell you when you want to kill a dog, you first give it a bad name and the way that the Jubilee government is doing it is not going straight to devolution, and saying that devolution is bad, but you start by giving governors bad names. You know, you start an unjustified attack on governors.

IR: Alright. IE 2, your take?

IE 2: Ah, number one, devolution is not an option. It is not a choice for this government. This government can’t kill it. Even future governments can’t kill it. That is number one. And it is not a preserve of any political party or individual.

These observations are in line with what Entman (as cited in Severin and Tankard 2010) observed. He said that this portrait of framing has important implications on political communication. Frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions. Politicians seeking support are compelled to compete with each other and with journalists over news frames. Entman (as cited in Severin and Tankard 2010) adds that

framing occurs when media make some aspects of a particular issue more salient in order to promote a certain problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation.

Labeling and referencing are often used to polarize audiences on ethnic basis. Richardson (2007) observes that the way people are named in news discourse usually has a great impact on how they are viewed. In the interviews, it is clear that the political actors are given various labels and references that make their supporters identify with them in solidarity to protect the image of their party, hence their ethnic communities; the supporters of opposing parties also coalesce around their leaders and this results in ethnic polarization. The language used has ideological implication because it pits tribes against each other and it indirectly shows that political parties are the same as ethnic amalgamations. A lot of political metaphors are used to justify this.

The audience members felt that there are more positive issues that can be discussed in these interviews. They noted that the fact that same politicians are featured all the time meant they were there to protect interest of their political parties and hence secure and maintain support.

Interviewers were guided by the news values of timeliness, prominence and conflict. Therefore, the choice of interviewees was based on their status, whether popular or controversial. The choice was also determined by the interviewer's ability to represent well the motivations or objectives of the parties on whose behalf they spoke.

It was therefore observed that journalists and media houses had reduced the political discourse to concern two coalitions before and after the 2013 elections as if they were the only ones. It is observed that there were more than two political parties at that time and that there were more than two presidential candidates who contested the 2013 elections. Journalists indicated that their stations' policies would not tolerate a dull or boring and seemingly neutral guest because they will lose the audience. This is why most of the interviewees who graced the shows were controversial or those that held hard-line stances. This is in line with Norris, Kern and Just (1993) who provide the following explanation: "The selection of particular attributes of a story gives important information about the perspective of the media sources. These perspectives can make selected attributes salient and shape public opinion differently in political contexts with varying coverage. A limited set of media messages can lead to a narrow range of activated attitudes in the collective public opinion." This is why in Kenya it almost seems that through the media framing there are only two political factions yet they are so many.

Journalists also argued that they are objective in the way they present issues. However, audience members felt that journalists did not achieve neutrality. This was echoed by the political analysts who stated metaphorically that 'the media has gone to bed with the government and politicians' and that what they give the public is not for the public's sake but for the media and the sake of the political class and therefore are used to broadcast biased messages.

Journalists however defended their work by saying that they cannot record every fact as every event has several facts to it. Street (2001) offers insight on why it is difficult for journalists to achieve neutrality. He starts by saying that a neutral media will present a full and fair account of the facts but this is impossible. This is because the media are constituted in business who have to serve a market (audiences and advertisers) and this means tailoring the reporting to the needs of the market. Hence long, factual accounts may drive viewers or readers away, besides, there are deadlines to meet. Secondly, the fact that there is an infinite number of facts to any event, the criteria of relevance has to be selected. The study found out that unfortunately the audience members do not have knowledge of these technical aspects of news processing. And therefore what they receive through the media and hence the political interviews is seen as the only facts and the natural form of events when actually this is not true.

Clayman and Heritage (2002), Heritage and Clayman (2010) also agree with the above view. They say that although most people assume that an interviewer should be completely neutral, this is

not achievable. Heritage (2010) notes that questions will inevitably always contain some reference to particular attitudes or assertions. However the advice that all IRs should strive to achieve neutralistic stance and therefore they can balance their choice of interviewees and ask questions or make statements that are devoid of biases. Journalists added that they also call in people who will account for their actions or those of the parties they represents. Montgomery (2007) states that accountability is one of the key principles of a democratic society. Hence responsible people are held accountable in various institutionalized activities. In this regard politicians are expected to justify their decisions and actions. This was exhibited in the political interviews in this study. The results of cases where politicians were called to account for their actions or for the parties they represented ended causing controversy on air which is interpreted as real controversy by the audience hence causing polarization.

CONCLUSION

It was found out that audience polarization occurred when members of the audience took sides with their leaders without objectively looking at the issues being discussed. Polarization was in form of hate speech, name-calling and stereotypes against ethnic communities in Kenya. This was seen in the different commentaries given by members of the public as well as through feedback sent to the television stations during interviews. The journalists select items that are potentially divisive and capitalize on them to become part of what is emphasized and given prominence. Media framing is then seen as a key aspect of political economy of the media in Kenya where political actors are major considerations in media programming.

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