

An Investigation of the Impact of Media Content on Voter Perception and Their Choice of Presidential Candidates: A Case Study of Sayare Radio in Kisii Town

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Abstract

An investigation of the impact of media content on voter perceptions and their choice of presidential candidate was carried out in Kisii town, Kenya. The study focused on Sayare Radio station whose broadcasts cover the Gusii region. The outcomes of the study show that the media especially Radio is still the dominant source of information on presidential candidates during elections. A total of 79 percent of the respondents indicated they had obtained information on presidential candidates from the media. Media has a significant effect on the opinions of voters. A total of 24 percent of those who listened to broadcasts changed their minds after listening to political programs. Another significant finding was that some respondents who received broadcasts did not know whether their voting choice was influenced by the media or not. Sayare Radio commands a listenership percentage of 35 percent within the Kisii Town region as far as the coverage of political events is concerned. Of the respondents who listened to Sayare Radio's broadcasts, 50 percent agreed with the position that its coverage of political events leading up to the elections was objective and balanced. Another 39 percent of the respondents who listened to Sayare Radio's broadcasts disagreed with the position that its coverage of political events leading up to the elections was objective and balanced. A total of 11 percent of the respondents who listened to Sayare Radio's broadcasts were non-committal on whether or not they were influenced to vote for their candidates of choice by the broadcasts. It is therefore evident that the media has a significant effect on the voter's opinion when it comes to presidential elections. The media plays a major role in determining the outcome of presidential elections in terms of providing voters with information about presidential candidates and also influencing their opinions on the most suitable candidates to vote for.

Key words: Media; Media content; Voter perception; Liberalization of Media

1. Introduction

The Kenyan society has in the recent past made great strides in terms of the amount and variety of information available within the public domain. This has come about as a result of the liberalization of media following the introduction of multiparty politics in the country. According to Lumumba, Mbondenyi and Odero (2011, p33 -35) the Constitution of Kenya Amendment Act Number 10 of 1997 scrapped Section 2(a) of the Kenyan Constitution that had restricted the country to being a one-party state from the time of its enactment in 1982. The writers explain that "In Kenya, the media have played a critical role in sensitizing the society on the importance of embracing democratic values and principles." The subsequent passing of laws enforcing independence of the media and the right to seek, receive and impart information or ideas; as stated in Articles 33 and 34 of constitution are a landmark in freedom of expression in the country as explained by Lumumba, Mbondenyi and Odero, (2011 p80- 82). The media is playing an increasingly influential role in the production and dissemination of this information. This is done through media channels in the form of newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television networks, online newspapers and chat rooms, social media and even mobile phone news updates that enrich the citizens' daily menu of news and entertainment.

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According to Donsbach and Patterson as cited in Tumber (2008, p108), a journalist has been defined as a person who makes decisions directly affecting news content. The current expansion of the media arena in the country therefore has effectively transformed the Kenyan journalist into a powerful agent of social change in both positive and negative terms depending on what their agenda and influence may be. Dale Jacquette, writing in the *Routledge Companion To News and Journalism* (2010, 213) states that: ‘We look to journalists to be our eyes and ears about important events. We avail ourselves of journalistic expertise in collecting and interpreting facts that are vital to our own decision – making or that inspire our interest. The information presented by journalists is generally so important to our lives that we expect journalists to the best of their abilities to write and speak the truth. The enterprise of gathering and presenting news is pervaded by experienced judgment in which professional, moral and market considerations mostly coincide but sometimes collide. There are conflicts of interest that arise daily for practicing journalists, and these conflicts, between the facts the public needs and wants to know, and the profit motive, reporters’ personal, political, religious and other biases, create tensions that are reflected in the moral choices about whether and how to report certain facts as news that a journalist must repeatedly make.’

The March 4, 2013 presidential elections were a critical moment in the history of the country; not only in the annals of political developments but also in professional media practice, hence the need for this study as a way to critically examine its impact on the voters during the process. It was therefore necessary that a study be conducted to see if the voters’ decisions were made due to media influence.

2. Methodology

This study applied the descriptive survey approach. The design enabled the researcher to construct questions that were utilized in obtaining information and identifying individuals being interviewed. It assisted the researcher to identify means through which the survey research was conducted and also in summarizing the data in a manner that provides the required descriptive information. Descriptive design was also used to collect information on people’s opinions on the presidential candidates as well as their views on the media content available about these individuals. The researcher coded the primary independent variable, *voter perception*, as a continuous variable ranging from 1 to 5, i.e. Strongly Agree, Agree, Strongly Disagree, Disagree and Don’t Know based on how respondents described their view of the media’s objectivity and balance in the coverage of political events in the run – up to the presidential elections of March 4, 2013 and measured it against their voting choices to obtain the conclusions that are outlined in the report. The study involved a total of 100 individuals randomly selected to obtain a representative sample of the Kisii Town population. The study targeted the residents of Kisii Town’s environs and Sayare FM Radio, which broadcasts to them from its station office at Nyanguru Satellite Broadcast Centre, 3 kilometers from the town.

Study sample was arrived at by selecting 20 individuals from each of the 5 outlying areas adjacent to Kisii Town. The study used convenient sampling. Target areas for the sampling were chosen conveniently within the environs of Kisii Town. To ensure comprehensive data validity the subjects were randomly selected from each area or zone, making them 100 in total. Random sampling was done with care taken to ensure that 50 percent were males and another 50 percent females for gender parity.

3. Results and Discussions

Research Question 1

Were the voters influenced to vote for their preferred candidates by the media?

From table 1 below, the study was limited to only registered voters who cast their ballots during the elections.

Table 1: Registered Voters

NO.	TOTAL INTERVIEWED	107
	VOTERS IDENTIFIED	100
	THOSE WHO VOTED	100

Table 2: Poll Results

CANDIDATE	TOTAL INTERVIEWED	POLL RESULT	PERC ENTAGE
Uhuru Kenyatta	100	52	52
RailaOdinga	100	41	41
Musaliamudavadi	100	3	3
Peter Kenneth	100	1	1
Martha Karua	100	0	0
AbdubaDida	100	0	0
James Ole Kiyapi	100	0	0
Paul Muite	100	0	0
No Clear Winner	100	3	3

From Table 2, it is evident that 52 percent of the total respondents thought that Uhuru Kenyatta would win the elections. Another 41 percent thought that RailaOdinga would win, while 3 percent thought or perceived that Mudavadi would win.

From table 3 below, it is evident that 79 percent of the total respondents interviewed received their information on the likely winner from radio news and talk shows, newspaper articles, television news broadcasts and internet websites on the same. 64 percent obtained it from radio news talk shows, newspaper articles and television news broadcasts. 57 percent obtained it through television news and newspapers. 48 percent used newspapers only as their source of information, while a total of 21 percent obtained it through discussions with friends and utterances at political rallies by politicians. 18 percent obtained it through discussions with friends as their only source of information.

Table 3: source of information

Voters' Source Of Information On Presidential Candidates	Total Number Of Respondents	Percentage
Radio talk shows/ news broadcasts, Newspaper articles, Television news, Internet websites / social networks	100	79
Radio talk shows / news broadcasts, newspaper articles, Television news broadcasts	100	64
Radio talk shows / news broadcasts, Newspaper articles	100	57
Radio talk shows / News broadcast	100	51
Newspaper articles	100	48
Political speeches at campaign rallies, Discussions with friends	100	21
Discussions with friends	100	18

From table 4 below, it is evident that 43 percent of the total number of respondents who received their information on presidential candidates from the media voted for their candidates despite the media projections on the likely winner. This represented 54.4 percent of the 79 respondents who obtained their information on presidential candidates from the media.

52 percent of the respondents perceived or thought that Uhuru Kenyatta would win the elections prior to March 4, having received their information from the media. 43 percent of the voters voted for their candidate of choice, 19 percent voted after changing their minds based on the media broadcasts representing 24 percent of the voters who received information from the media on presidential candidates. A total of 17 respondents who received the broadcasts, representing 22 percent remained non – committal on whether the media influenced their choice at the ballot box or not. This is shown in the results tabulated below:

Table 4: presidential candidate choice of the voters

OPINION COUNT	Total Interviewed	Poll Result	Percentage
Voters who perceived Uhuru as the likely winner	100	52	52 percent
Voters who voted for their preferred candidates despite the media broadcast	79	43	54 percent
Voters who changed their minds about their candidates after media broadcasts	79	19	24 percent
Voters who didn't know if media influenced their choice or not	79	17	22 percent

Research Question 2

Were the voters choosing their preferred candidates in spite of the information they had accessed through the media?

Here the research narrowed down to the 79 percent of the respondents who obtained their information on presidential candidates from the media. Table 3 shows the percentage of voters who changed their minds after the media broadcasts on the likely winner of the elections and those who ignored the broadcasts.

A total of 43 respondents representing 54 percent voted for their candidate of choice despite the media broadcasts.

A total of 19 respondents representing 24 percent changed their minds on their preferred candidate after receiving the broadcasts.

A total of 17 respondents representing 22 percent did not know whether the media influenced their choice in voting for their candidate or not.

Table 5: Voters Preferences

VOTERS' PREFERENCES	TOTAL INTERVIEWED	POLL RESULT	PERCENTAGE
Voters who voted for their preferred candidates despite the media broadcasts	79	43	54 percent
Voters who changed their minds about their candidates after media broadcasts	79	19	24 percent
Voters who did not know if media influenced their choice or not	79	17	22 percent

Research Question 3

Was the media content on the candidates broadcast by Radio Sayare based on the principle of objectivity, or was the media partisan and biased in its coverage?

The study focused on the 79 percent of the total voters interviewed, those who had confirmed receiving information on presidential candidates from the media. Of these 79, a total of 28 listened to news broadcasts about presidential candidates from Sayare Radio. The other 48 received their broadcasts from other media sources.

This indicates the coverage of political events by Sayare Radio attracted only 35 percent of the 79 respondents who obtained their information on presidential candidates from the media.

Table 6: Information on presidential candidate

TOTAL INTERVIEWED	SAYARE LISTENERS	NON - LISTENERS	PERCENTAGE
79	28	51	35 percent

On the issue of the respondents’ opinion concerning the objectivity and balance present in Sayare Radio’s broadcasts, the research focused on the respondents who had listened to Sayare Radio.

A total of 6 respondents representing 21 percent strongly agreed that Sayare Radio’s broadcasts were balanced and objective.

A total of 8 respondents representing 29 percent of the respondents who listened to Sayare Radio’s broadcasts merely agreed that Sayare’s broadcasts were balanced and objective.

The poll result suggests that 50 percent of the respondents who received Sayare Radio’s broadcasts agreed in varying degrees that its coverage of the elections was balanced and objective.

A total of 7 respondents representing 25 percent of the respondents who listened to Sayare Radio’s broadcasts disagreed with the position that its broadcasts were balanced and objective.

A total of 4 respondents representing 14 percent of the respondents who listened to Sayare Radio’s broadcasts strongly disagreed with the position that Sayare Radio’s broadcasts were balanced and objective.

This in summary suggests that 39 percent of the respondents who received Sayare Radio’s broadcasts disagreed in varying degrees with the position that its broadcasts were balanced and objective.

A total of 3 respondents representing 11 percent of the respondents who received Sayare Radio’s broadcasts were not sure whether its broadcasts were balanced or not. Table 5 shows the results of the poll conducted to gauge the listeners’ perception of the station’s fairness and balance in political news coverage.

Table 7: objectivity of news

WAS OBJECTIVITY APPLIED IN SAYARE RADIO STATION’S BROADCASTS?	TOTAL INTERVIEWED	POLL RESULT	PERCENTAGE
STRONGLY AGREE	28	6	21 percent
AGREE	28	8	29 percent
DISAGREE	28	7	25 percent
STRONGLY DISAGREE	28	4	14 percent
DON’T KNOW / CANNOT TELL	28	3	11 percent

In summary based on the above findings, media is the dominant source of information on presidential candidates during elections. A total of 79 percent of the respondents interviewed indicated that they had obtained their information on presidential candidates from the media.

The media has a significant effect on the opinions of voters. A total of 24 percent of those who listened to the broadcasts changed their minds after listening to media broadcasts.

In spite of the above finding, the research discovered that a large percentage of the voters still chose to vote for their preferred candidates despite the media broadcasts. 54 percent of the voters interviewed voted for their candidate of choice even after receiving the media broadcasts.

Another significant finding was that 22 percent of the respondents who received media broadcasts did not know whether their voting choice was influenced by the media or not.

Sayare Radio commands a listenership percentage of 35 percent within the Kisii Town region as far as the coverage of political events is concerned.

Of the respondents who listened to Sayare Radio's broadcasts, 50 percent agreed with the position that its coverage of political events leading up to the elections was objective and balanced.

Another 39 percent of the respondents who listened to Sayare Radio's broadcasts disagreed with the position that its coverage of political events leading up to the elections was objective and balanced.

A total of 11 percent of the respondents who listened to Sayare Radio's broadcasts were non – committal on whether or not they were influenced to vote for their candidates of choice by the broadcasts.

It is therefore evident that the media has a significant effect on the voter's opinion when it comes to presidential elections. The media plays a major role in determining the outcome of presidential elections in terms of providing voters with information about presidential candidates and also influencing their opinions on the most suitable candidates to vote for.

4. Recommendations

1. The press needs to be more objective and balanced in its coverage of presidential candidates during the period leading up to the elections. This will prevent the recipients of media broadcasts from perceiving bias and partiality in its products. As Robert Lowe put it in *The Times* of 6 February 1852, refuting Lord Derby's claim that a press which aspired to share the influence of statesmen must also share their responsibilities;

The first duty of the Press is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the time and instantly, by disclosing them, to make them the common property of the nation...For us, with whom publicity and truth are the air and light of existence, there can be no greater disgrace than to recoil from the frank and accurate disclosure of facts as they are. We are bound to tell the truth as we find it, without fear of consequences...Even the triumph of [the public writer's] opinions is not accompanied by the applause of a party or the success of a struggle for patronage and power. Those opinions which he has defined, and, so to speak, created, slip from him in the moment of their triumph and take their stand among established truths. The responsibility he really shares is more nearly to that of the economist or the lawyer whose province is not to frame a system of convenient application to the exigencies of the day, but to investigate truth and to apply it on fixed principle to the affairs of the world (Tumber, p47).

2. Journalists are duty – bound to be the primary sources of factual information to the public. They have a responsibility to truth which at times may even transcend the national interest. In this case, Lowe states that the appeal is not just to the public interest of the people of one state, but to 'the cause of civilization throughout the world.'
3. The media should put facts above commercial and other parochial interests if it is to serve the people effectively. Another celebrated ideologue on journalism, C.P. Scott, coined the dictum 'comment is free, but facts are sacred' in the course of a speech setting out the professional responsibility of journalists. This should be the guiding principle in the broadcast of information concerning presidential candidates.
4. The media needs to recognize the difference between pronouncements of opinion by political actors and the truth and report them as such. The quote by Kenneth Burke in his *Attitudes Towards History* (Allan,

2010, p270) “...businessmen compete with one another by trying to *praise their own commodity* more persuasively than their rivals, whereas politicians compete by *slandering the opposition*. When you add it all up, you get a grand total of absolute praise for business and grand total of absolute slander for politics.”

5. The Kenyan media disappointed the public by reporting political events leading up to the elections in a biased and unbalanced manner. The various Kenyan media houses, caught up between these two extremes of ensuring that their products are the most persuasively offered and drawing a clear distinction between slander and constructive political debate between the popular candidates, exceeded the boundaries of honesty, balance and fairness and instead jumped on the bandwagons most suited to their sponsors and customers’ tastes. The essence of that decision was a great disservice to their biggest customer and sole reason for existence, the Kenyan citizenry.
6. The Ministry of Information and Communications, the Media Council of Kenya, the Kenya Union of Journalists and the Communications Commission of Kenya, which are regulatory bodies involved in the control of journalists’ conduct in the country, need to consultatively agree upon a common framework of standards that will serve as guiding principles of journalist and media house conduct in the coverage of sensitive political events such as presidential elections.
7. Journalists and media houses need to be extremely careful with their coverage of political events leading up to presidential elections to avoid polarizing the country along ethnic lines. This will ensure that the delicate balance between national unity and diversity in political alternatives during presidential elections is achieved and maintained.

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