

Interrogating Daily Newspaper Peace Messages during and after the 2013 Elections in Kenya

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Abstract: This study analysed the Daily Newspapers messages that called for peace in the run up to the 2013 elections. The study relied on descriptive research design and was premised on Agenda Setting theory as espoused by McCombs and Donald Shaw. Purposive sampling was used to select newspaper content with peace messages and to select newspaper readers in Nakuru town. Focus group discussions were used as research instruments to collect data from the selected respondents from Nakuru town. Collected was subjected to open, axial and selective coding for analysis purpose. For the data obtained from newspaper content, Content analysis formed the main part of the analysis. The findings of the study has it that newspapers in the run up to 2013 elections carried peace messages in news and feature stories, in their editorial sections, opinion and advertisements. However, the findings show that although experts and scholars accused media of ‘indulging’ in peace advocacy and forgetting their watchdog role, the respondents praised the role media played in ensuring after poll calm and peaceful coexistence and tolerance. The study findings are useful to the media houses and media in their effort to use newspapers as a medium of peace reporting and other forms of advocacy.

Keywords: Peace Reporting, Peace Messages.

INTRODUCTION

The mass media are the most common sources of information about election campaigns in democracies and societies in transition around the world. In terms of the sheer volume of information available to citizens via the media on issues, political parties and leaders, election campaigns often represents a high point for political communications. Camps aim to repress turnout to accomplish their goals. It is the larger context of political party strategies and tactics, and the structure of the mass media environment, that we also need to consider when we turn to addressing questions about reportage and coverage of election campaigns and the electoral process.

Media plays an increasingly important role in shaping the culture of our society [1]. Media, be it electronic, print or otherwise has always had the opportunity to collect, process and disseminate information and knowledge with the objective of developing inclusive knowledge societies. It is required, however, that in their duty journalists and editors demonstrate their professionalism while reporting and giving information to the society [2]. Therefore, ethical and professional standards are required to make the best out of the pivotal role good journalism plays in today’s societies. Newspaper reporting has been in the line of

journalism for decades and its function in the society is highly significant.

In Kenya, elections have usually been marred by violence. Kenya became independent from British rule in 1963. Kenya’s constitution guarantees freedom of the press, free speech and freedom of assembly. The public service broadcasting ethos, with the duty to ‘inform, educate and entertain’ predominates. Journalists are known for independent and objective reporting. Broadcasting in Kenya was originally modeled on the BBC, following the introduction of radio in 1927 under British colonial rule. Television stations include the government-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), Kenya Television Networks (KTN) among others as well as international channels. Newspapers in Kenya are privately owned and they have played a Fourth Estate role when criticizing the government, policies and political leaders.

The 2013 elections, came as was expected but the tensions were high and media took upon itself to ensure people’s confidence in Kenyan’s institutions such as the rule of law; the courts, the electoral body and the security agencies. Media was at the Centre stage to orchestrate a historical moment and through newspapers, the media sought to pass peace messages

that could regain Kenyan's confidence in themselves, their friends and their government.

The newspapers, alongside other mainstream media played a big role in ensuring Kenyans remain calm, patient and peaceful even after some challenges faced the electoral body and the tallying process. In their unpublished journal article, "Media as the Opium of the Masses" Ndonge and Nabeba [3] argue that the relative peace witnessed in the 2013 elections was occasioned by the fear of the media that violence would occur again like in the case of the 2007/08 post election violence. According to them, the call for peace through messages was intended to achieve peace irrespective of whether the election process was free and fair, and that the masses were well informed of the entire process a phenomenon many argue that the media played the role of peace activists.

A newspaper is a publication that is printed on paper and whose issues come out regularly, usually daily or weekly [4]. Newspapers carry information and opinions on current affairs or events and news items. Usually, newspapers carry a lot of topics and issues with them especially on politics, crime, sports, business and opinion among other issues. The underlining factor in newspapers is that people like reading them in order to be updated on local and international issues and happenings. Newspapers are important media in covering volatile events such as elections and war. In Kenya, for example, newspapers are known to lead in the coverage of elections. Elections are unavoidable in democratic societies and media is always out to ensure free, fair and democratic election processes. It is ostensibly based on free and fair elections that leaders are elected into political offices to oversee the affairs of any independent nation and Kenya is no exception.

Statement of the Problem

Peace reporting is a contemporary issue in journalism and newspaper reporting. In the run up to the 2013 general elections, Kenyans were constantly reminded of the 2007/2008 post election violence through newspaper reporting. The newspapers urged people to embrace each other, vote peacefully and maintain calm by constantly running headlines and other content. Experts argue that the media played the role of peace activists at the expense of their watchdog role. At all times, the media is expected to exercise impartiality while at the same time performing its watchdog role. Since little or no study has been done on, the implication of peace reporting in newspapers and the coverage of elections in Kenya there was a need to investigate this phenomenon.

REVIEWED LITERATURE

Newspaper as a mass media is one of the most powerful forces for shaping public opinion. Newspaper headlines as a subgenre of media genre are of

importance in news discourse. As an opening section to their relevant main text, headlines have been ascribed different functions. Headlines and leads have been referred as categories forming "the summary" of the news reports. Newspaper headlines play a critical role in determining the readership of an issue [5]. Newspaper headlines are usually packaged with special linguistic characteristics. A well written newspaper headline must be able to attract attention of the reader.

Readership of newspapers has declined sharply over the last 20 years around the globe. This decline seems set to continue yet further due to technological advancements. In particular, the countries so called 'popular' newspapers are now a lot less popular than they once were. But even the ability of the quality press to maintain its overall level of readership also looks unimpressive given the increase in the number of graduates in the population over the last 20 years. It could be argued that this is healthy for most countries' democracy. It means that the ability of newspapers unfairly and unaccountably to sway the outcome of an election, is now much diminished. It also means that fewer people are exposed to their supposedly cynical coverage of politics that discourages people from participating in politics at all. But this seems too dismissive a picture. Popular newspapers were once a mechanism whereby information about politics could reach those with little inclination to follow political matters. Now they are increasingly unable to fulfill that role. Instead, the readership of newspapers in Britain and other parts of the world including Kenya is increasingly confined to those with an interest in politics. For years politicians have worried about the power of the press. But perhaps, instead it is time for them to be concerned about its weakness.

Newspaper readership is a generational phenomenon. Older people acquired the newspaper reading habit many years ago when there were indeed fewer alternative sources of news or entertainment. But as they die out, they are being replaced by younger people who have not acquired that same habit, because of the wider range of sources of information that are available when they were growing up. The impact of technological development ranging from television to the internet has been the reason.

According to Sparks [6], the newspaper audience is increasingly inclining towards a need for sensationalism but during elections, the audience expects a lot from media and is constantly expecting new information and counsel from the media. Since headlines are meant to be sensational, headlines pass a message to the audience that ensures viewers evaluate such stories as objective and believable [7]. During elections, any political news is news and people are eager to know what is happening with the other party or the party they support. In fact the election process

brings with it hype and a lot of sensational materials coming from the politicians through the media engage the minds of the affected society into a political hype [8]. It is this time that media can take a chance to control and direct the society's minds to think, behave and act in a certain way.

Theoretical Framework

The Agenda setting theory was used to serve as a theory in understanding the concept under investigation. Kurt Lewin coined the term "agenda setting" in 1947 to describe the people who decide which messages go through the gates that control information flow to reach the consumers. An agenda setter decides on the information to be published and by so doing, they are able to control the public's knowledge of actual events. According to Tan and Weaver [9] agenda setting is concerned with the various stages a newspaper item goes through in a newsroom before it is finally published. The source, the reporter, the sub editor and the editors are in their own rights agenda setters since they determine what ends up as news. Factors of political interference, personal interests, media law and ethics may determine the amount of agenda setting, an exercise that can be both useful and dangerous. It is useful if it shields audiences from harmful information and dangerous if, it shields the public from the truth.

This theory is important in the study in the sense that only issues that are perceived to be of importance by the media are let out to the public domain. This means only a few of the information material can get to the pages. These messages shape people's perception of events and people in connection their reaction to the outcome of the 2013 general elections. Even though some scholars have come out to castigate the reporting of the media during the 2013 elections in Kenya, it is important to know that loyalty to one's country and cooperation with government agencies that might have been biased could have arisen out of the "best wish" for the country. "Best wish" for the country includes peaceful election, favorable image internationally, and national cohesion and peace. This is what Kenya experienced in the 2013 elections. In line with this understanding, the media might have chosen to go after press releases and briefings in order to avoid investigation and reporting of the electoral process, which could have resulted in information that could inflame ethnic and political sectarian passions, presenting an unfavorable image of the country. The choice to report electoral political events as opposed to pointing at sensational anomalies of the electoral process may also have been conditioned by 2007 General election and peace campaigns that preceded elections. There were intense media peace campaigns through advertisements, NGO and religious meetings.

Agenda setting theory [10] prioritized issues that the media want to be in public discussion. Because of the desire to protect a newspaper's reputation and the desire not to inflame public passion that may disrupt national cohesion and peace, newspaper editors choose to make a wise choice while at the same time controlling the attitude of the readers. This theory was useful in trying to understand how the Kenyan media set the agenda for the Kenyan society that it was time to maintain peace by being tolerant, patient and understanding. The newspapers and other media based their argument of the horrors of 2007/ 2008 post election violence.

METHODOLOGY

This study used the descriptive research design. The researcher used purposive sampling to select newspaper content with peace messages and to select newspaper readers in Nakuru town. Newman [11] upholds purposive sampling as a method of sampling where the researcher deliberately chooses who to include in the study based on their ability to provide necessary data. These samples and sampling technique provided data needed to answer the research questions posed in the study. The content was hard news, soft news, opinion pieces, and editorial cartoons or attached messages on adverts. The researcher therefore chose between 6 and 12 participants at four vending point to be to form four FGDs in the study. These four FGDs provided enough information for the study. The study used focus group discussions as research instruments to collect data from the selected respondents from Nakuru municipality. According to Newman [12], a research instrument is "a tool used to collect data. Since the data collected in the study was qualitative in nature, all data collected through focused group discussions was subjected to open, axial and selective coding for analysis purposes. The data was categorized into headlines, hard news, soft news, editorials, and advertisements. The analysis covered the themes, meanings and relationships of the messages elicited and intended by the newspaper editors to the audience.

The study Findings

Messages from the Newspapers Front Page

The 2013 march 4th elections were preceded and followed by peace messages from our news papers. Most of these messages were placed at the headlines. For example, on February 25, before the elections, the daily nation carried a story in which Kenyans flocked to Uhuru Park to pray, repent and seek to forgive and be forgiven ahead of the March 4th elections. The message was right at the front page thus:

Joining hands for peace [tens of thousands flock to Uhuru Park Nairobi for a moving experience of prayer, repentance and forgiveness]

On the material day, the whole of daily nation front page was dedicated to only two word message:

"NEVER AGAIN" in white background to echo the messages that had been repeatedly crusaded that Kenya should never again go the 2007/2008 violence way.

This was to be followed by more messages after elections. This was accompanied by editorial cartoon strip that carried the message *"PEACE"* and showing the vote with the message being cast into the ballot for the elections. Two days after elections, i.e., on 6th March, the front page story headline was reporting the bid for Kenyans to remain calm as the independent electoral and boundaries commission processed the results. The headline was: *"Calls for calm as IEBC faces results delays"*.

The front page still continued to call for peace even long after the supreme dissolved the dispute that erupted. The editors were not leaving any chance of telling about steps meant to Kenyans coexist peacefully. For example, on April 20, the newspaper front story was focusing on Uhuru Kenyatta and his second run up candidate's effort to unit Kenyans: *"Uhuru, Raila in fresh bid to unite Kenyans"*.

Peace Messages from the Editorial Pages.

The daily newspaper also carried peace messages and majority of such were found in the opinion section. The page contained the opinion from Kenyan writers, commentaries on the opinion and the editorial column written and published by the Daily nation staff as the voice of the newspaper. The messages started as early as February 20, when the newspaper opinion showed the efforts made by Kenyans to ensure the forthcoming polls would be free, fair and peaceful: *"Kenya's partners working to support polls that are free, fair and peaceful."*

There were also messages from the opinion page that traced the progress of the politicians and the messages in which they constantly called for peace. Such reporting was paramount given the intensity of the matter and the history of Kenya's experience with post election violence. For example on March 1st, the page story was: *"Use final rallies to push for peaceful elections."* This message was also elaborated on the March 4th editorial story which called for a united effort to maintain peace during voting: *"Let's send out a firm message: never again"*.

On the same day, a more critical message appeared on the opinion page thus:
We have traded peace for justice and ourselves the two can't coexist. The piece was accompanied by a photo message *"Vote responsibly, keep peace, enjoy life One love, one people"*.

Mixed Reactions after Voting

After the March 4th elections, the opinion page however, started carrying critical messages and analysis

of the event following a tension moment as the cord went for a petition against Jubilee candidates win. The messages on the March 12 opinion celebrated peace, but mourned the tensions that followed: *"Peace triumphs but Kenya remains a deeply divided nation."* A day after, another opinion piece was to carry out a more open call for peace on social media where Kenyans had resorted to cyber bullying and some unprecedented war online: *"Cool down dangerous war on social media."*

The opinion page also continued to carry more messages especially a piece that praised media for advocating for peace throughout the period of elections. An example is the March 12 piece: *"The media did a highly professional job under extremely difficult circumstances."* However, the opinion also was critical of the peace messages and carried some headlines such as of March 16: *"Peace messages being peddled betray a society on the brink of implosion"*. The exit messages for the month of April as the tensions cooled down were directed to the two candidates with majority of Kenyan followers. For example on April 1, the message was: *"National healing must remain top of the agenda"*.

The April 10 message: *"Now walk the talk of unity, Mr President."* And April 20 was referring to the war on social media and calling for Cord and Jubilee candidates to intervene and tame their followers: *"Uhuru and Raila must rein in their supporters feuding on social media."*

Messages in the News Feature Pages

In the run up to the 2013 elections, the newspapers used features and news stories especially those covering on the subject of peace. They covered stories that related to issues of peace advocacy. For example, on March 12, the daily nation carried a story that reported of the effort elders in Kenya were putting in ensuring there would not be any violence after elections. This was done in recognition that elders were the opinion shapers and that their stand could mean a lot in the advocacy process. The headline read: *"Elders Strive to Nurture Post-Poll Peace."* Another story covered on March 22 brought onboard the religious institutions perspective on the hate speech that followed the announcement of Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto as the president and deputy president elect. The headline was, *"Clerics Call end to Hate Speech on Social Media."*

The news feature stories followed the unfolding events after the 4 march elections as includes a headline that the elect president spoke to Kenyans regarding the state of peace after the elections. The story was tagged: *"Uhuru Salutes Kenyans for Keeping Peace."* This came amid tensions and as the country came into terms with their promise of keeping peace amidst loosing elections. The March 30 stories were focusing on the issue of a presidential petition that was

filled by the Cord leaders disputing the outcome of the election.

The ruling was awaited and leaders were calling for peace as reported by a story headlined: “*Leaders Appeal for Peace Ahead of Petition Ruling.*” It was after the ruling that much disunity erupted on social media between the beneficiaries (Jubilee followers) and the Cord followers who were declared as official opposition. It was tension especially given that the opposition leaders have no place to be in parliament in the new constitution because they were not allowed to contest for other elective positions as in the new constitution. The government elect had to give reassurance of uniting Kenyans. This is exemplified by a story on April 10 headlined: “*Ruto Pledges Unity Following Poll Divisions.*”

Peace Messages in Promotional Content

The 2013 election was awaited with mixed expectations and caution because of the experiences of the 2007/2008 post elections violence. The violence had taught Kenyans that violence affects all stakeholders ranging from individuals, politicians, the church, the business world and non governmental organizations. Therefore, the run up to 2013 elections saw all stakeholders converge to call for peace and at least pass their message in their own ways to the society that peace should be prioritized.

As early as February, the advertisements and promotional content by different companies and organizations carried peace messages. On 1st February, for example, the National conference for gubernatorial candidates emphasized on peace and bought a space in the daily nation where their theme was *Peace Communiqué* (deliberating on peace) in Partnership: Deloitte, Family Bank, Kenya vision 2013, PWC, Housing Finance, Transforming Kenya, National Democratic Institute, and United Nations Development Partners [UNDP]. The candidates called for peace ahead of the 4th March elections and promised to celebrate with decorum and accept defeat in their respective 47 counties. The promotional page where the meeting proceedings were made public and declarations drawn was bought by the transitional authority of Kenya.

Another advert with peace messages was on February 6 by elections observation group which had the message: “We all Want Peaceful Elections”. The most remembered however was a national prayer meeting called by Prophet David Owuor of the ministry of repentance and advertised on televisions and newspapers. On February 23, the daily nation published a promotional poster headlined: “*Historic National Repentance: Day of Peace and Reconciliation.*” The message was so significant because the prophet had all

presidential candidates come for prayers and acceptance of peace.

On Feb 26, 2013 the daily nation set aside a promotional space where they had a poster with the message: *As we approach the 4th march 2013 elections, it is crucial for us Kenyans to maintain peace during and after the elections period.*

This was placed alongside an advert by Inter-Governmental Standing Committee on Shipping (ISCOS) with the title: “*Kenya’s General Elections: A Call for Peace.*”

The ushering in of the month of March was marking dramatic steps toward elections and the newspaper on 1st March carried unapologetically peace advocating messages which were very detailed. For example, the Kenya Commercial Bank Group (KCB) incorporated the following message in form of a pledge in its audited results for the period ended 31 December 2012:

Peace pledge!
In every aspect of my life, I will advocate and promote non-violence
I will solve problems, and not attack people
I will always look to find a common ground...even when there could be disagreement...because I recognize that it is our differences in thought and perspective that makes us unique
I will be willing to work towards addressing, and fixing problems through consensus and in a spirit of respect for all involved
I will not support people who promote tribalism, or other divergent views based on religion, gender, culture or background
I will make an effort to achieve peace by peaceful means.

On the same date, the daily nation had a page reminding Kenyans on the events of the 2007/2008 post election violence in a bid to remind them that they should not go the same way again: the poster carried the message:

In the year 2007/2008, some 1300 people were killed, 633921 people displaced, property worth billions of shillings destroyed. Never again shall we kill one another, maim, destroy property and displace fellow Kenyans. Vote peacefully on 4th 2013 and thereafter remain a peaceful united country, Kenya

The NAKUMATT Supermarket also had an advert notifying its customers that it would not open its supermarkets on 4th March. The advert had a title message, “*Vote Wisely, Vote for Peace*”.

After elections, most companies and organizations incorporated peace messages in their advertising or promotional posters. For example, on 20th March the crown paints Kenya carried a message creatively incorporating what they called “*The Uniting Colors of Kenya: Peace, Love and Unity.*” There were also congratulatory messages after the elections incorporated in the promotional content such as the one by NACADA on 3rd April thus “Thank you Kenyans for voting peacefully” and another on April 9, 2013 by Kenya Tourist Development Corporations (KTDC) that read: “*We also congratulate all of us Kenyans for Peaceful Elections.*”

Kenyans’ Reactions to the Peace Messages

The second objective of the study was to establish Kenyans’ reactions to the peace messages from the newspaper content. The following were the results from the interview schedules with the newspaper readers after they were shown the peace messages from the newspapers. The results are presented as derived from the questions asked. The participants were asked whether they read Daily newspapers and how often they did so. From the responses, majority of the participants agreed that they were readers of daily nation newspaper. However, they reported that they could miss daily nation but not weekend editions i.e., Saturday and Sunday nation newspapers.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study show that there were messages carried by the nation newspapers during the run up to 2013 elections. The findings show that the newspapers carried such messages in their front pages, the news and feature sections, the editorials and the advertisements. This way, the messages were able to have huge impact on the audiences. The participants of the study agreed that they actually saw the messages and they understood the meaning of each message clearly. These findings are in line with the literature reviewed with regard to the newspaper messages and the agenda of the messages as set by the media elite professionals. In conclusion, the nation newspaper carried peace messages than any other time. The messages were also distributed throughout the major sections of the newspaper such as the front page, the news and feature articles, the editorials and the advertisements among others. This way, the messages were made effective and accessible to readers of different interest.

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