

Evaluating Respondents’ Reactions to the *Daily Nation’s* Peace Messages in the Run-up to the 2013 Elections in Kenya

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this study was to evaluate respondents' reactions to the messages that called for peace from the *Daily Nation* newspaper in the run-up to the 2013 elections in Kenya. The study relied on descriptive research design, which is a design in qualitative research and premised on Agenda Setting theory by McCombs and Donald Shaw. The study population consisted of respondents from four marked newspaper-vending points within Nakuru town and the selected contents from the *Nation* newspapers. These newspapers carried messages advocating for peace between the periods of February and April 2013. Purposive sampling was used to choose newspaper contents with peace messages and to select newspaper readers in Nakuru town. Focused Group Discussions and Interviews were used as research instruments. Content and textual analysis was the primary form of data analysis in the study. Research findings showed that *Nation* newspapers carried peace messages in news and feature stories, editorials, opinion and advertisements. The conclusions of the study show that although media experts and scholars accused the media of ‘indulging’ in peace advocacy and forgetting their watchdog role, the respondents praised the role media played in ensuring after the poll calm, peaceful coexistence and tolerance.

Key Terms: peace messages, peace reporting, peace, peace advocacy.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of post-election violence in Kenya dates back to 1997, and the peak of it was experienced after the 2007 elections that led to the infamous 2007/2008 post-election violence. This claimed lives of close to 1400 people and internally displaced hundreds of thousands of others. Therefore, the 2013 elections were a defining moment for Kenya, hence was aimed at ensuring peace and nonviolent outcomes. The media was blamed for failing to uphold its professional standards in 2007 and thus partly contributing to the violence (Krieger Report 2009 & Waki Report, 2009). It was for these reasons; therefore, that formed the basis of the 2013 peace messages for fear of a repeat. The post-election violence gave birth to a new constitution promulgated in 2010 that established new institutions such as the Supreme Court, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission among other institutions that would ensure justice in future elections.☐

Kenyan went to the ballot on 4th, March 2013 to elect preferred leaders as is the Constitutional requirement for elections to be held after a term of five years. However, there exist various controversies as to how the media managed to mediate peace throughout the electoral process. Differences in opinion emerged as some scholars argue that the press might have censored itself concerning how it conducted itself throughout the entire electoral process (Ndonye, 2013). Many believe that journalists' discretion reflected responsible journalism. A case in point is the Media Focus on Africa (2013) which opines that the Kenyan media received praises both locally and far away, on how they managed to calm the country after the hotly contested 2013 election. On the contrary, foreign media was criticised for always muckraking for violence news even when there was peace.

In these regards, the media has a moral obligation to ensure free, fair and transparent elections and governance (Louw, 2008). Before the 2013 elections, the media owners,

editors' guild and other industry stakeholders held consultative forums to establish the best way to cover the elections. The result of such forums was a signing of a code of conduct that would guide journalists in ensuring free, fair and balanced coverage of elections process that would ensure Kenyans remain calm, have confidence in their institutions and ensure a peaceful transition from one government to the elected one. It is from this background that the role that newspaper peace reporting played in Kenya in the run-up to 2013 elections needs to be evaluated and the outcomes determined.☐

LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Newspapers Influence to Readers

Most people like reading newspapers because newspapers give them information that shapes the way they react, relates and perceive issues affecting them (Johnson-Laird, 1983). There would not be a lot of interest in studying newspapers if they did not influence the way the audience relate to issues. Peace reporting in newspapers demands a lot of self-awareness from the editors and reporters. As such, media is in a position to promote peace or trigger violent responses to conflict issues because media content has been proved to determine, shape and affect the behaviour of individuals and groups (van Dijk, 1996).

Most countries like Britain have long had a highly partisan national newspaper industry (Seymour-Ure, 1996), in contrast to others like the United States. Several newspapers ally themselves with one political party or the other. Thus, for example, the *Daily Mirror* of Britain has consistently supported the Labour Party for long, whereas *The Daily Telegraph* is usually considered the Conservative Party's house journal. The stance adopted by a newspaper can most obviously be discerned from its lead columns but is certainly not confined there. Its outlook on politics outlook usually does also affect what stories are prominently featured and how they are presented. Therefore, someone who reads one particular newspaper

regularly can be exposed to a slant on events that could be expected to encourage them to vote for one part rather than another.□

The first charge against *newspapers* is mainly concern about their tendency to praise one party while criticizing another. The second view argues that newspapers have the problem of criticising all politicians. Thus, instead of reporting on what politicians do and say, journalists are viewed as increasingly interpreting politicians' actions and words, and often through a cynical frame of reference. For instance, if a politician introduces a tax cut, this may be reported as an attempt to bribe voters. If a president visits the United States, it may well be construed as an effort to distract the public from focusing on the political difficulties at home, (Harrop, & Scammell, 1992).

In the reporting during elections, all political content is news, and the media houses have many alternatives to select from. However, Hamilton (2004) argues that what information becomes communication depends on ; Who cares about a particular piece of information; What they are willing to pay to read it, or what others are willing to pay to access them; Where can media outlets or advertisers reach these people; When is it profitable to provide the information and Why it is beneficial.□

2) Power and Ideology in Political News during Elections

During elections, the issues of power and ideology dominate the media and newspapers in particular. Ideology is the attitudes, set of beliefs, values and doctrines regarding political, social and economic life, responsible for shaping the individual has and group's perception and through which media constructs reality and have the audience interpret it (van Dijk, 1996). Ideology is based on the maxims that no news content can pass the test of being neutral, transparent or innocent in its packaging. Van Dijk (1996) argues that ideology informed critical social theory throughout the twentieth century. Language, as

used in the headlines, therefore, can never appear by itself; it always represents a system of linguistic terms, which themselves reflect the current discursive and ideological systems (van Dijk, 1996).

In order for a mass medium to have the readers react the way they want, they should be particularly useful when the readers "do not realize the nature or the implications of such control and when they change the minds of their own free will, as when they accept news reports as true or journalistic opinions as legitimate or correct" (van Dijk, 1996: p.11). In this case, the evaluation of social power in media, together with its symbolic dimensions, requires going beyond a narrow social or political approach to power and control. It is significant to study and consider the mental representations, including social cognitions such as ideologies and attitudes, shared by groups of readers or viewers (Kahneman, & Tversky, 2000). If we can relate more or less explicitly such mental representations, as well as their changes, to properties of news reports, essential insights into media power can be gained. It is from this standpoint that the influence and control that mass media such as newspapers has on the readers can be precisely understood.□

For the newspapers and other mass media, scholars approach is negative because mediated information is seen as either prejudiced or concealed such that the audience's knowledge and beliefs are altered in a direction that may not in its best interest (van Dijk, 1996: p.12). However, in the study, the manipulative function of the newspaper headlines was seen as being positive in the sense that they manipulated the readers and the audience at large to be tolerant, accommodative and embrace peace in looming crisis. Therefore, to understand legitimate or acceptable power and distinguish it from power abuse, the term dominance should be considered.□

According to van Dijk (1996), dominance usually takes the form of "processes of reproduction that involve strategies aimed at the continued preferential access to social resources and the legitimating of such inequality" (p.13). It should be here noted that although the mass media have exclusive access to the peoples' minds, it does not mean it has total control over them (Overbeck, & Park, 2001). The readers of newspapers, for instance, have always had freedom of choice of what they can read and what they can leave out. The messages may not also change the readers' mind along the lines desired by the more powerful newspaper editors and reporters. As such, the readers may react with rejection, disbelief, criticism, or other forms of resistance or challenge that signal modes of counter-power (Altheide, 1985). Through the stories and headlines in the newspapers, the forms or modes of discourse may indirectly be accessed through text, and this content is known to shape the readers' mind in one way or the other.

Kenya has a perception of a country that lacks ideology (Ndonye, 2013). Before 2010, Kenya's political landscape was an amalgamation of several ideological colours. Four separate phases of ideological development can be identified, and they correspond to the global geopolitical shifts. Firstly, in the 1960s, the nationalist elite across the political divide shared the ideology of freedom. However, the nationalist consensus soon collapsed, giving way to ideological polarization between the left-leaning socialists and west-leaning rightists or capitalists (Ndonye, 2013). To begin with, the leftists lost the fight. Secondly, the decade of 1970-1980 ushered in Kenya's age of absolutism which was philosophically based on the Hobbesian concept that people must be willing to submit to absolute rulers since life without government is brutish, short and nasty. Absolutism was the inspiration for the imperial presidency of the KANU era. Thirdly, the end of the Cold War and the triumph of capitalism over communism/socialism in the late 1980s ushered in the neo-liberal ideas of a free market,

progress (change), equality and freedom, which underpin the new constitution.

After KANU's fall in 2002, all political factions have made claims of ideological to the pursuit of the national developmental and democratic state in Kenya. This overarching ideology was the driving force behind the NARC Government's Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation (ERS), the creation of the National Social and Economic Council (NSEC) and Kenya Vision 2030. In the same vein, both the Jubilee Alliance's and ODM/Cord coalition's manifestoes are in tandem with this overarching ideology. Beyond this dominant ideology, after the 2013 elections, Kenya's political class is badly divided along two competing and opposed ideologies, which are likely to colour the struggle for power on the road to 2017 election (Ndonye, 2013). The first ideology, associated with the Jubilee administration, is the "growthist" or "productionist" paradigm that lays emphasis on economic productivity and growth. The productionist thinking has as its priority numerous mega-projects in infrastructure and energy aimed at reducing the cost of production, growing the economy, transforming the country into a middle-income level state and pulling the mass of Kenya's poor out of poverty. The second ideology, associated with ODM/Cord coalition, is the "distributionist" paradigm. The new constitution, particularly the devolution component, was looked upon to end the perennial problem of distributional grievances which precipitated the 2008 post-election violence. The "distributionist" paradigm rests on two ideological planks benefiting a few ethnic groups, which are anarchism and brazen ethnocentric (Ndonye, 2013).

Anarchism is a belief that everything about government is repressive, and therefore must be challenged or abolished entirely (van Dijk 1996). The new Security Laws (Amendment) Act, 2014 has been used to fortify the alarmist thesis of the return of dictatorship. Pushed to the

extreme, anarchism leads to another ideology known as nihilism or a belief that everything must be periodically destroyed to start again. The second plank, which is a brazen ethnocentric ideology, seeks to polarize the country into ethnic-haves and ethnic-have-nots. Speaking in September 2013, the retired South African Judge, Johann Kriegler, noted that, despite its much-acclaimed new constitution, the only way to save Kenya is by liberating the country from ethnic ideologies. Recently, ethnocentric thinking has been bolstered by formal studies claiming injustice in the public sector because certain ethnic groups dominate civil service. A report unveiled recently by the Public Service Commission chairperson, Margaret Kobia, which incidentally found its way into the cover story of the *Daily Nation* (DN January 8, 2015) claims that five communities (Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luhya, Kamba and Luo) are over-represented in the public service. Why this “revelation” should be newsworthy and intriguing is puzzling. Collectively, these communities constitute over 75 % of the national population. Naturally, they are bound to be proportionately higher in any sector of the Kenyan society.

Even though newspapers alone are not responsible for this phenomenon, they have been found to raise the heat on particular issues, thereby helping to shape the understanding and perception of politics over time (van Dijk 1996). They can also create a climate that legitimises specific issues over others, setting the boundaries of policy debates that make it difficult for parties outside this consensus to appear rational or credible. So, for example, while the Green party argues for an end to austerity, a new wealth tax on the top 1% of earners and a significant rise in the minimum wage, most national newspapers would simply characterise these policies as being too radical and potentially damaging to the economy.☐

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research design, one of the qualitative research designs, was used in the study. The population of

the study was twofold: everybody who could read the *Nation* newspaper but the target population was Nakuru town and the *Nation* newspaper editions that carried contents of peace messages, but the target population was the *Nation* newspaper editions that were published in the period between February, March and April 2013. The researcher chose Nakuru town for the study because it was the heart of former Rift Valley province and the bedrock of the infamous 2007/2008 post-election violence according to Kriegler and Waki Reports (2009). The researcher used purposive sampling to select *Nation* newspaper contents with peace messages and to select newspaper readers in Nakuru town. The sample size of newspaper readers consisted of respondents from four marked newspaper vending points (Section 58, Huduma Centre next to the National Bank of Kenya, Afraha stadium junction and Kenya Farmers Association roundabout) within Nakuru town. With the help of the newspaper vendors from each vending points, the researcher was able to identify frequent *Nation* newspaper readers, which formed the Focused Group Discussion and the participants in the interview sessions. The researcher thus selected between 6 and 12 participants at four newspaper vending points to form four FGDs in the study.☐

With regards to the sample size of the *Nation* newspaper contents with peace messages, the researcher selected a total of 33 excerpts from the *Nation* newspapers (*Daily Nation*, *Saturday Nation* and the *Sunday Nation*) between the period of February, March and April 2013. These excerpts were then grouped into five categories, namely: headlines, opinion pieces, editorials, news stories, and Advertisements. With the help of the newspaper vendor, the researcher engaged the respondents in Focused Group Discussions. Since the main aim of the study was to examine the implications of *Nation* newspaper peace reporting in the events leading up to the 2013 elections in Kenya, the study used descriptive research design to solicit for qualitative data in the study. Therefore, to arrive at the

sample size of the study, the researcher focused on analyzing peace messages one month to and a month after the elections. In this case, the researcher analyzed peace messages in February, March and April 2013 from *Nation* newspaper cuttings purposively in one month.□

The study used Focus Group Discussions and interviews as research instruments to collect data from the selected respondents from Nakuru town. The FGDs consisted of male and female respondents comprising of 6-12 respondents per group. In using this technique, the researcher formulated a list of question guides that were posed to the participants after they were shown the newspaper cuttings of the peace messages from the *Nation* newspaper. Through the Focused Group Discussions, the researcher was able to get the respondents reactions to the messages that promoted peace in the run-up to the 2013 elections in Kenya and to determine the readers perceptions on the contributions of the peace messages to the 2013 elections in Kenya which the researcher needed to collect for his second and third objectives respectively.

The researcher also used the interview schedules to collect his data; however; the interview questions were almost similar to the FDGs questions. The aim of the interview was basically to establish the respondents' reactions to the peace messages that were carried in the *Nation* newspaper cuttings and to establish whether the peace messages informed their behaviours before, during and after the 2013 elections. The interviews were supplemented by issuing the respondents with *Nation* newspaper cuttings with the peace messages they carried in the run-up to 2013 general elections. The contents were selected from newspaper cuttings from Egerton University Nakuru Town Campus library and archives section and photocopied the relevant contents for the study. The researcher collected newspaper contents from the publications in February, March and April 2013. □

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Kenyan's Reactions to the Peace Messages

The objective of the study was to establish Kenyan's reactions to the peace messages from the newspaper content. The following interview schedules results were obtained from 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 *Nation* newspapers and how often they did so. From the responses, the majority of the participants agreed that they were readers of the *Daily Nation* newspaper. However, they reported that they could miss daily editions but not weekend editions, i.e., *Saturday Nation* and *Sunday Nation* newspapers. In most cases, weekend editions are well read given that people are off their formal jobs. This gives them ample time to read and reflect on the stories and issues highlighted. This explains the reason why such editions are more details and carry more information than dailies. The readers were aware that weekend editions carry more detailed stories. They also agreed that the weekend editions carried many messages regarding peace.

3) Trust and Reliance on the Media Messages

As to whether the respondents trust and rely on the media messages, majority of the participants in the FGDs agreed that they trust the media fully and only a few participants argued that they partly trust the media. The majority who fully trust the media argued that the media reports precisely what is happening and that there are a few circumstances when the media has been involved in cooking or guessing information. An argument by one of the participants, which was unanimously supported, was that no other institution could consistently inform and educate “wananchi” like media. “Hata kanisa tunaenda siku moja ama mbili kwa wiki, lakini habari tunapatiwa kila wakati (even in church, we are served once or twice in a week, but as for news you get them every time).□□ The respondents who felt that they partly trust the media gave their

reasons. It was a feeling among them that the media has been, in several circumstances, blamed for exaggerating their news in the guise of reporting accurately. These respondents invoked the experiences of the 2007/2008 post-election violence in Kenya. Most of these respondents solely argued that the media played a significant role in kindling the violence. However, they argued that if the media had not reported the few places where the violence began, the rest of Kenyans would have known that there is fighting in some parts of the country. Consequently, this large percentage would not have thought of fighting because most of them fought back to revenge after getting news from the media that 'their relative's and 'people of their tribe' were being fought by other tribes in some parts of the world. This, in turn, played a part in fueling the violence and the infamous experiences of the 2007/2008 post-election violence.

4) Interpretation of the Peace Messages Shown

Concerning the take on the peace messages shown by the media, most participants had the view that they are positive messages geared toward the healing of the nation and for the integration of all Kenyans regardless of one's tribe. However, they argued that peace messages portrayed by the Kenyan media had been taken to be a fashion, and very few people know the outcome and impact of peace messages on Kenyan media. These respondents aired their view that there should be an attempt to fill the gap between well-meant peace-messages portrayed by the media so that they not taken literally.

According to these respondents, the messages target regions emerging from conflict, encourage tolerance and dialogue, strengthen non-violent conflict resolution systems, and increase understanding of human rights as critical priorities. The media has commonly tried to change the civic values, political culture and practices of resolving conflict at the local level through extensive education,

dialogue and information campaigns. These peace messages have worked as intended; they have changed and continue to change the harmful norms and behaviours of Kenyans while promoting positive norms and behaviours among Kenyans. Additionally, most interviewees argued that the peace messages shown on media are just pretences aired to make Kenyans forget the regular conflicts occurring in the country from time to time. This portion of respondents supported their argument by the view that the peace messages shown on media are precisely the opposite of what happens in day to day life. For instance, they argued that Kenyan leaders are leading in dividing Kenyans instead of uniting them; at the same time, these same leaders are in the frontline preaching peace in the media.

5) Appropriateness of the Peace Messages

Upon enquiring from the respondents whether the peace messages were appropriate during the 2013 election run-up, majority participants in the FDGs were for the opinion that the messages were appropriate while 40% disputed that the messages were not appropriate at that time. The respondents at the interviews felt that the messages were appropriate at that time argued that there was need to remind Kenyans from time to time and especially during that last minute to elections that peace in the country was very crucial. They further added that Kenyans forget quickly, that there was a probability they had forgotten what begot the country after the 2007 general elections hence there was need to take them back, remind them of the bloodshed during the time and urge them to maintain peace during the 2013 general elections.

According to the interviewees, peace messages were not appropriate during that time; their views were that; peace is something built over time, according to them rushing with peace messages during the last minute might not do much. At the same time, they felt that the essential for building a culture of peace is education for peace.

According to them, the United Nations has called on every country to ensure that children, from an early age, benefit from education to enable them to resolve any dispute peacefully and in a spirit of respect for human dignity and of tolerance.☐

Discussion of the Results

The study addressed the question regarding the respondent's reactions to the messages that called for peace from the *Nation* newspapers in the run-up to the 2013 elections in Kenya. The findings show that the respondents were influenced by the messages, and they considered the messages in their conduct. Peace reporting in newspapers demands a lot of self-awareness from the editors and reporters. As such, media is in a position to promote peace or trigger violent responses to conflict issues because media content has been proved to determine, shape and affect the behaviour of individuals and groups (van Dijk, 1996). It was established from the FGDs and interviews that respondents were convinced to remain calm and united during and after elections because they trust media and the media guided them on how to conduct themselves through peace messages. This line of thought is supported by the literature reviewed in which it was found that ideology is the attitudes, set of beliefs, values and doctrines with reference to political, social and economic life, responsible for shaping the individual's and group's perception and through which media constructs reality and have the audience interpret it. Ideology is based on the maxims that no news content can pass the test of being neutral, transparent or innocent in its packaging.

This is in agreement with Van Dijk (1996) stand that ideology, informed critical social theory throughout the twentieth century. The agenda setting theory, as supported by Tan & Weaver (2007), has it that 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. For the period under study, all media corroborated to preach peace and avoid the repeat of the 2007/2008 post-election experiences.☐☐These results support the literature reviewed further because, as it was analysed, the issues of power and ideology dominate the media and newspapers in particular in times of general elections. And since ideology is the attitudes, set of beliefs, values and doctrines with reference to political, social and economic life, responsible for shaping the individual's and group's perception and through which media constructs reality and have the audience interpret it, it becomes very critical when people are in the mood of election and transition. Van Dijk (1996) argues that ideology informed critical social theory throughout the twentieth century.

CONCLUSIONS

The study's objective was to establish respondents' reactions to the messages that called for peace from the *Nation* newspapers in the run-up to the 2013 elections in Kenya. The respondent's reactions were tested through two research tools; the Focused Group Discussions and the interview schedules. From both the FGDs and the interviews, the researcher established that the participants agreed that the messages published in *Nation* newspapers informed their behaviour patterns towards the 2013 elections in Kenya.

They thought that the *Nation* newspaper did an excellent job to advocate for peace given the experiences of the 2007/2008 post-election violence. Majority of the respondents believed that peace advocacy was the best thing that the media could do. However, the study findings did not entirely concur with what some media experts and media scholars had argued especially the fact that the media (both print and electronic) neglected their watchdog role at and concentrated on peace advocacy.

The researcher concludes that respondents believed that the *Nation* newspapers played a remarkable role, and they expected the media to do no less than they did. The respondents also were of the view that since they trust media, the media in the time under study did not let them down and that it should do as so in future.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends various approaches to newspaper peace reporting in the run-up to elections in Kenya. These measures should involve impartiality by journalists, and at the same time, the journalists should not abdicate their watchdog roles. The researcher, therefore, recommends the following:

- i. Journalists should be sensitized on implications of peace reporting, especially in the electioneering periods. This is because the media (whether print

or electronic) has got immense influence on the outcomes of elections either way.

- ii. Journalists should not abdicate their watchdog role while trying to cover election stories and instead abide by the journalists' code of conduct and guidelines on election coverage, know what should be reported and what not to report so that they do not suppress some information.
- iii. Journalists should be able to distinguish between peace journalism from peace advocacy, practice responsible journalism and should not be seen to be promoting certain ideologies but let the readers make independent decisions based on the information provided to them.

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