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PORTRAYAL OF CORRUPTION IN THE XYZ SHOW IN KENYA

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the narrative structure of the XYZ Show in its representation of corruption in Kenya. Through episodic storytelling, the show constructs narratives that mirror real political events and institutional failures, allowing corruption to unfold as an expected and normalised part of governance and public life. Using a qualitative, multimodal approach, the researcher collected and analysed the visual, verbal, gestural, written, and actional modes used by the puppets in the episodes, in relation to the representation of corruption. The analysis was guided by the Peircean semiotic theory; the study analysed twenty purposively selected episodes addressing corruption. The researcher sampled episodes that mentioned major corruption scandals in the country, or that met the criteria for corruption events. Several themes emerged, demonstrating that corruption is deeply embedded in the storyline and communicated through satire, irony, and symbolism. The codes identified across the episodes included: corruption normalised, global satire, media as a watchdog, musical commentary, narrative irony, and symbolic scenarios. The findings demonstrate that the show constructs corruption as a systemic and normalised phenomenon through episodic plot cycles, satirical exaggeration, symbolic staging, and recurring narrative motifs. The study contributes to media scholarship by illustrating how indirect narrative strategies enable critical political commentary while negotiating censorship and political risk in semi-authoritarian contexts. The study recommends that future research should explore audience interpretations of these narrative structures to assess how satire influences perceptions of corruption. Comparative studies across African satirical programs may further illuminate the role of narrative form in political critique.

Key words: Corruption, media representation, satire.



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INTRODUCTION

The representation of corruption in popular media, such as the XYZ Show, plays a critical role in shaping public perception and the understanding of real-world corruption. Although political satire is widely acknowledged as a tool for social critique, there is limited scholarly attention on how narrative structures within satirical television programs represent corruption. Corruption remains a persistent socio-political challenge in Kenya, deeply embedded within political institutions and governance practices. While mainstream journalism plays an important role in exposing corruption, its effectiveness is often constrained by legal, economic, and political pressures. In such environments, satirical media forms have emerged as alternative platforms for political critique. Existing studies on corruption in the media often focus on news framing or investigative journalism, leaving a gap in understanding how fictionalised, humorous narratives function as vehicles for political meaning.

Indirect reporting platforms used in the country include memes, political commentary, short skits and theatre plays, political songs, caricatures, mimicry of political figures and puppet shows. Despite its longevity and cultural significance, the XYZ Show has received minimal academic scrutiny, particularly regarding how its plot structures depict corruption over time. This study addresses this gap by providing a systematic narrative analysis of corruption-focused episodes of the XYZ Show. The study aimed to provide a comprehensive media analysis of corruption representation in the XYZ Show, contributing to a deeper understanding of media representations through indirect reporting strategies. The XYZ Show represents a pioneering example of televised political satire in Kenya, employing puppetry and humour to address sensitive political issues indirectly. This is because the puppeteer can hide behind the mask of the puppets, taking on a persona related to but not directly attributed to an individual. This enables them to openly discuss corruption, especially involving high-profile individuals, without directly mentioning them.

Satire functions as the primary narrative device through which corruption is portrayed. By exaggerating political scenarios and ethical dilemmas, the XYZ Show uses humour to draw attention to serious socio-political issues while maintaining audience engagement. Despite its popularity and significant cultural influence, there has been minimal academic attention to how the show

specifically portrays corruption and the factors that influence it through its narratives.

This study focuses on how the XYZ Show uses narrative structure—including plot progression, repetition, symbolism, and episodic design—to depict corruption. Unlike conventional news reporting, the show relies on satire-driven storytelling to encode meaning, allowing audiences to interpret corruption through humour, exaggeration, and symbolic representation. Understanding this narrative construction is crucial to appreciating satire's role in shaping public discourse on corruption.

The study was guided by the objective of analysing the narrative structure of the XYZ Show in its depiction of corruption. It was further guided by the following specific objectives: To examine the normalisation of corruption in the XYZ Show. To highlight the use of global satire in the XYZ show. To evaluate the media's watchdog role as explained in the XYZ show narrative. To examine musical commentary as a satirical narrative tool in the XYZ show. To analyse the use of narrative irony as a satirical narrative tool in the XYZ show and to examine the symbolic scenarios used within the show's narrative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Representation and Narrative Construction

In a talk with University of Westminster students in London, Stuart Hall notes that media representations of situations, events, ideas, and people either affirm or distort reality (Hall, 1997). Hall adds that different forms of language, whether written, spoken, or non-verbal, are used to convey meaning to the audience in the media (p 11). This language is conveyed through signs and codes in media texts, and people interpret them according to what they are familiar with in society.

Media representations are not neutral reflections of reality but are constructed through selective narrative processes (Hall, 1997; 2005). The media's representation of individuals, groups, or events, and of social and political issues, may help create a shared meaning among a group of people in a particular context. The issues could be political, cultural or social, for example, gender, ethnic and political representations within particular contexts.

Over the years, satire in the media has gradually shifted from theatre to television, especially since television can reach a mass audience more quickly and over a wider geographical area than other mass media platforms. One of the main functions of satire is to provide a platform for criticising social evils. Satire provides a safer way for journalists and other media actors to criticise social evils that would have otherwise cost them their jobs and, in other instances, even their lives, especially in countries with little or no freedom of expression.

The narrative structure used in the satirical programs plays a critical role in shaping how audiences understand social problems by organising events, assigning causality, and emphasising certain meanings over others. In satire, narrative construction often relies on repetition, irony, and exaggeration to critique dominant power structures.

The media representation strategies used to address corruption raise awareness of the issue, foster accountability, and shape public opinion and attitudes toward it. The representation of corruption in the XYZ show is crucial for raising awareness, influencing public attitudes towards the vice, and sparking debate on the issue.

Satire as Narrative Strategy

A report by the World Bank (2001) acknowledges the role of the fourth estate in the democratisation process by influencing people to demand institutional change (whether in politics or business), shaping their opinions and actions, and providing a platform for minority groups to participate. The people are therefore able to accept the media's stand on corruption as the truth and the most acceptable position. It can also be used to educate the public on what constitutes corruption, consequences and possible remedies.

The challenge with direct reporting is that journalists are prone to defamation suits when they cannot provide proof. Satire has therefore been seen as a safer approach to highlighting social evils such as corruption. Satire operates by exposing social vices through ridicule and symbolic inversion (Quintero, 2007). Television satire, in particular, uses episodic storytelling to revisit unresolved social problems, reinforcing their persistence.

Scholars argue that satire's narrative power lies not in offering solutions but in repeatedly revealing

contradictions, hypocrisy, and moral failures within society (Brillenbourg, 2011). However, questions arise about the effectiveness of this in bringing about positive change in society. The media representation strategies used to address corruption raise awareness of the issue, foster accountability, and shape public opinion and attitudes toward it. The representation of corruption in the XYZ show is crucial for raising awareness, shaping public attitudes towards the vice, and sparking debate on the issue.

According to LeBoeuf (2007), satire can identify the shortcomings of certain human behaviours and social issues in a humorous way for a wide audience. It is useful to journalists working in hostile political environments by providing a scapegoat for criticism of social evils as the issues are implied.

Puppetry and Indirect Political Narratives

However, media reporting on corruption is hindered by media ownership and the lack of media freedom in developing countries. Satire provides a safer way for journalists and other media actors to criticise social evils that would otherwise cost them their jobs and, in some cases, even their lives, especially in countries with little or no freedom of expression.

Visual images have the advantage of adding impact to the messages being passed across to an audience. Theatre in Africa has long been used to portray the challenges faced within communities, including plays and puppet shows. It is an effective method as it caters for the illiterate, aids message retention, objectifies reality, and also entertains, thereby appealing to many when addressing certain difficult issues (Peretu et al., 2012). According to Article 19 (2003), during the colonial era in Kenya, theatre was seen as a platform for advocating for independence and was hence banned. It, however, later re-emerged in the millennial era with the development of civil society, using this platform to highlight the social ills caused by the political elite.

In the millennial period, the continent and Kenya have witnessed a growth in puppet shows, both in live theatre and on television. They have been used for different purposes ranging from education, creating awareness on social issues such as HIV/Aids as well as entertaining the public. They have proven to be a good platform for highlighting sensitive issues, as they attract people from different social groups and ages. Meaning, however, is

drawn within specific societal contexts. The XYZ show is the first television show in the country to use puppets for satire, highlighting social and political issues in the country and the continent.

Puppetry allows for symbolic distancing, enabling sensitive political critique while reducing direct accountability. Through caricature and exaggerated performance, puppet-based narratives encode political meaning in ways that are accessible yet deniable. This makes puppetry a powerful narrative form in politically constrained environments.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, which conceptualises meaning-making through the relationships among the sign, the object, and the interpretant. According to Kenney et al (2005), the sign refers to the mode of communication used, such as sound or image; the interpretant refers to the image that the person associates with the sign, and the object is the idea that the image or sound represents. Semiotics provides an analytical lens for understanding how narrative structures in satire construct meaning beyond literal representation.

The study seeks to use semiotic theory to identify the communication modes used in the puppet characters (sign) and how they have been used (interpretant) to represent corruption (object). Narrative elements—such as recurring plotlines, symbolic actions, and exaggerated scenarios—function as signs that audiences interpret in relation to real-world corruption.

According to Pierce (1961, p. 27), signs can generate meaning if one can differentiate the sign depicted from the actual sign. Different genres have different ways of drawing meaning from the signs presented in the media. There is therefore a need for a third-party interpretation of the signs to get a comparative analysis of the common meaning attached to the signs.

The theory is key in drawing out the relationship between the puppet characters' choice of words and gestures, the episodes' plots, and other communication modes, and how they work together to construct an interpretation of corruption within the Kenyan context.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive research design was employed to examine how corruption is narratively structured within the XYZ Show. This study involved an in-depth study of the different data sets- textual, speech, facial expressions and gestures used by the puppet characters, analysed together to draw an interpretation of the representation of corruption. Purposive criterion sampling was used to select twenty full episodes based on the mention of major corruption scandals and other corruption events implied in the episodes. Twenty full episodes featuring corruption as a central theme were purposively selected from the official XYZ Show YouTube archives. Criterion purposive sampling was used to select the sample population from the 26 full episodes uploaded. Corruption was featured in all episodes in different forms. The researcher sampled episodes that mentioned major corruption scandals in the country or implied corruption. Season 12 was most featured in the study, as it used musical commentary in the last segment of each episode.

Multimodal data collection involves using different modes of communication to construct and modify meaning. Full show episodes featuring corruption were downloaded from YouTube and viewed to identify the different modes used repeatedly. Then the researcher transcribed the data using both manual transcripts and transcripts provided by YouTube and Turboscribe. The data were then logged by providing a descriptive account of the events in the video clips. The video clips were repeatedly viewed to identify the signs of corruption.

The researcher wrote an email to the production company, BuniTv, to obtain their permission to use their clips in the study and to ensure that participants were aware of the study's purpose and how their content would be used. The researcher also provided appropriate credit and citations for the videos used in the research. Permits from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and other relevant authorities were obtained to ensure compliance with research regulations. Multimodal data analysis was conducted using NVivo software to code and draw interpretations. The analysis focused on plot progression, repetition, symbolic framing, and narrative resolution patterns. Semiotic interpretation guided the identification of how narrative elements collectively constructed meanings of corruption.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The NVivo analysis generated 85 references across 20 files, indicating that corruption is deeply embedded in the show's overarching storyline rather than appearing as isolated incidents.

Several themes emerged, demonstrating that corruption is deeply embedded in the storyline and communicated through satire, irony, and symbolism. The codes identified common to the episodes included: corruption normalised, global satire, media as a watchdog, musical commentary, narrative irony and symbolic scenarios.

Corruption as a Normalized System

Several themes emerged, demonstrating that corruption is deeply embedded in the storyline and communicated through satire, irony, and symbolism. The codes identified common to the episodes included: corruption normalised, global satire, media as a watchdog, musical commentary, narrative irony and symbolic scenarios.

Among the plot-related codes, narrative irony recorded the highest number of references (29), suggesting that the show consistently employs contradictions between leaders' public responsibilities and their actual conduct. This recurring irony serves as a critical narrative device, exposing hypocrisy and reinforcing perceptions of systemic corruption. The episodes heavily rely on irony to expose contradictions between public responsibilities and actual conduct.

An example from season 13 episode 1, 'Madeni country' (1:18 - 4:06) highlights the national debt management strategies used by leaders. Leaders entrusted with protecting public finances become trapped in excessive borrowing without critical thought to the terms and modes of payment, as well as how this decision affects the country's financial situation.

Uhuru: 2:27 sasa Arutode hii sasa itaendaje
Ruto: 2:30 hapana we si ufulize
Uhuru: 2:30 nilishafuliza na raila ile mambo ya AU
Ruto: 2:33 ai na minilifuliza na world bank
2:35 sasa nitafuliza ingine wapi (the Chinese man peeps through the window trying to eavesdrop)
Uhuru: 2:36 mimi nimefuliza hadi IMF
Ruto: 2:38 ai IMF mimi nimefuliza hadi kwa sacco ya kina Rachel bwana.
2:41 Mwambie akuje next week si hatuko.
Chinese man: 4:00 hey hey

4:02 You people apply another loan from China to pay China.

4:06 shameless, very shameless

The irony lies in government officials solving debt by taking on more debt, as they are trapped by systems they created.

In season 13 episode 1, A project worth billions (Galana Kulalu irrigation scheme) intended to enhance food security produces.

Eugene: 14:02 okay wanasema ilikuwa 14 billion lakini tukabargain

14:08 wakatukatia kitu kidogo na kwenye hii mradi tulifaa kupanda mahindi

14:16 na pia kukausha mahindi yenyewe

14:19 hali kadhalika kutoa mafunzo ya nyanjani

Man with Somali accent from the crowd: 14:20 sasa alafu anapata nini

Eugene: 14:23 sasa that's what I'm coming to ah very

14:29 encouraging

14:30 yale mapato tumepata kwa phase one

14:34 ya huu mradini jumla ya chembechembe ya mahindi

14:37 almost 1 million yani individual

14:41 grains of maize, tukihasabu one one

14:43 one one, one one, one one, it gets 1 million

The contrast between massive investment and negligible output creates powerful narrative irony. This translates to absurd governance as a consequence of corruption, as the government is unable to explain the huge financial loss with too little gain to its citizens.

The relatively low reference count for Corruption normalised (8 references) suggests that while normalisation exists, the narrative more strongly emphasises exposure and critique rather than passive acceptance. For example, in season 12, episode 1, in the "Electoral Betting" segment (2:42-5:30), Uhuru and Ruto openly discuss government decisions on service delivery to its people as electoral bets. They calculate how reducing the price of maize flour, reducing legislators' salaries, and introducing benefits for elderly citizens could contribute percentages toward securing electoral victory.

For instance, Ruto states:

“Sasa tutabet kwa sites kadha mpaka tupate 50 plus 1” (3:05).

The conversation treats governance not as service delivery but as a strategic game aimed at winning elections. The casual manner in which state policies are discussed normalises manipulation of public resources for political gain.

Overall, the distribution of references indicates that *XYZ Show* relies heavily on irony and symbolism to portray corruption, positioning it as a structural and recurring element of the plot.

Satirical Plot Devices for Political Critique

As argued by LeBoeuf (2007), Brillenburg (2011), and Quintero (2007), satire enables criticism by disguising serious messages within humour, exaggeration, and performance. The study finds that satire is a key mechanism for communicating corruption. This supports media and communication theories that view satire as a form of political critique and resistance. Narrative irony is a symbolic sign indicating that leaders’ public roles contradict their private actions, and it is not visually literal but culturally learned, requiring audiences to interpret it based on shared political knowledge. The high reference count on narrative irony (29) suggests that symbolic meaning-making is central to how the show critiques corruption.

Music is used as a powerful satirical tool throughout some episodes. Musical commentary identified 8 references reveal the show’s use of humour, music, and exaggeration to represent corruption while simultaneously criticising it. In season 12, the episodes ended with songs adapted from copyrighted music, with a twist in the lyrics that highlighted corruption and other themes. Kibaki’s parody of Kenny Rogers ‘The Gambler’ in season 12 episode 5, Kibaki uses music to offer satirical political advice to Uhuru. The lyrics: “Know when to hold up, know when to shut up, know when to walk away” (19:13–19:20).

Symbolical Critique of Political Survival Strategies among Kenyan Leaders.

Global satire presented 10 references, showing that the narrative expands corruption beyond Kenya by satirising global power politics. Several political leaders from

Africa and around the world have been featured on the show. For example, in season 12, episode 3 in ‘Trumpy Leaks’ (3:36 - 6:09), Donald Trump is portrayed as reckless and distracted while handling nuclear weapons, while China secretly intervenes to protect North Korea. The segment suggests that abuse of power, poor leadership, and self-interest are universal problems in governance.

The use of global satire, musical commentary, and symbolic scenes reflects Devereux’s (2007) emphasis on codes and conventions as central to representation. Satirical elements such as musical performances and comedic sketches simplify complex governance issues, making them more relatable to audiences.

Media as a watchdog (12 references) functions semiotically as an index, pointing directly to the presence of corruption by exposing or reacting to it. However, the moderate reference count suggests that while the media indicates wrongdoing, it is not portrayed as fully effective in dismantling corrupt systems.

Media as a watchdog (12 references) highlights moments when media institutions challenge corrupt practices, though its limited references suggest that watchdog journalism is portrayed as present but constrained. The *XYZ Show* serves as a watchdog, exposing political contradictions and institutional weaknesses.

Throughout season 12, fictional journalist Ammanuel Juma questions political leaders about controversial issues in his segment ‘Politricks’. For instance, in episode 8, he asks Uhuru:

“There are serious allegations that you may have pinched chicken belonging to one Albiraia...” (6:35).

By interrogating politicians and exposing inconsistencies, the media is represented as an institution that scrutinises those in power. Other examples of media use in the show’s episodes included studio interviews in its ‘Upclose and Personal’ segment, where the hosts, Keff, interview prominent personalities in the country. Through such questioning, the program encourages public scrutiny of institutions, elections and other pertinent issues of public interest.

The moderate emphasis on watchdog journalism suggests an acknowledgement of media constraints. The use of

puppets in *XYZ Show* enhances this protective function, allowing creators to critique high-profile political figures without direct attribution.

Narrative strategies such as exaggeration, irony, and parody are central to the depiction of corruption. These devices create comedic distance while simultaneously exposing leadership impunity and institutional decay. Humour becomes a narrative tool that reveals rather than obscures political dysfunction.

Symbolic Narratives

Symbolic scenarios (18 references) further demonstrate how corruption is communicated indirectly through metaphors and staged situations, allowing the show to critique political misconduct without overt exposition. Symbolic scenarios (18 references) further demonstrate how corruption is communicated indirectly through metaphors and staged situations, allowing the show to critique corruption and governance failures. In season 12, episode 10 (8:00 - 9:10), the scene highlights voters' complacency in electing underperforming leaders to office.

Voice over for an advertisement: 8:37 je? Ushawai amka asubuhi ukajipata umetupa kura? Usihofu.

8:40 Sasa halmashauri ya wapiga kura inakuletea dawa shupavu iitwayo 'lenga DOL'.

8:48 Lenga DOL ina chembechembe maalum ya paracetamol inayokuinga na madhaara ya uongozi mbaya

8:53 pia kukufanya usihisi uchungu wa kwa mfano; kutumia barabara mbovu kwenye eneo lako,

8:58 wizi wa pesa za umma (a goat runs with a briefcase) ama ata kukosa ajira (a graduate sits roasting maize'.

The *Lenga Dol* advertisement symbolises citizens medicating themselves against the pain caused by poor leadership choices they make during elections, rather than demanding accountability. It represents citizens who bury their heads in the ground and feel guilty for not voting in leaders with the integrity to fulfil their responsibilities to them.

Set designs, props, and exaggerated physical actions function as narrative signs. Offices, podiums, and government spaces are repeatedly associated with deceit and excess, embedding corruption within the narrative environment itself.

A key narrative feature is the deliberate lack of resolution. Corrupt acts are rarely punished within the narrative world, emphasising satire's role in critique rather than reform and reflecting audience frustrations with real-world accountability failures.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that The XYZ Show employs a distinct satirical narrative structure that constructs corruption as systemic, normalised, and cyclical. Through episodic repetition, symbolic exaggeration, and unresolved plots, the show exposes governance failures while navigating political risk.

The use of narrative irony and symbolic scenarios suggests that the show does not merely mirror corruption as it exists but reconstructs it in ways that encourage critical interpretation. The symbolic scenes function as signs that stand for broader political realities, such as abuse of power or betrayal of public trust, rather than specific real-world events. Their recurrence strengthens the interpretation that corruption is systemic and normalised within governance structures.

The use of satire in the XYZ show reinforces this normalisation by presenting serious issues such as public debt and procurement scandals as routine occurrences. The use of global satire, musical commentary, and symbolic scenes encodes corruption through humour and exaggeration, allowing the audience to decode meaning based on shared cultural and political knowledge.

Narrative structure emerges as a critical mechanism through which satire fulfils its watchdog function in constrained media environments. Overall, the narrative structure of the XYZ Show effectively exposes corruption as a structural problem, using satire to stimulate public discourse while reflecting societal attitudes toward political malpractice.

Recommendations: The study contributes to media scholarship by illustrating how indirect narrative strategies enable critical political commentary while negotiating censorship and political risk in semi-authoritarian contexts. Future research should explore audience interpretations of these narrative structures to assess how satire influences perceptions of corruption. Comparative studies across African satirical programs may further illuminate the role of narrative form in political critique.

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